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A PROFESSIONAL

BEAUTY



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A PROFESSIONAL BEAUTY

A

PROFESSIONAL BEAUTY

BY

MRS. ALEXANDER FRASER

AUTHOR OF "HER FLIGHTED TRUTH," "A FATAL PASSION," "GUARDIAN
AND LOVER," ETC. ETC. ETC.

"Thy favours are but like the wind,
That kisseth everything it meets;
And since thou canst with more than one,
Thou'rt worthy to be loved by none!"

HERRICK

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7

A PROFESSIONAL BEAUTY.

CHAPTER I.

“I WILL SAVE HIM FROM JAEI.”

“I see thou hast pass’d sentence on my heart,
And I’ll no longer weep nor plead against it ;
But with the humblest, most obedient patience,
Meet thy dear hands, and kiss them when they
wound me !”

“*MAX* saw us yesterday. He has left
me. Good-bye, *Erroll*. We two must
never meet again.”

These were the few simple, almost childish words, that Quita wrote, after a sleepless

night, in the long dark hours of which she had seemed to see, over and over again, a poor white tortured face pressed against a window-pane.

Putting on her hat and cloak, and taking a valise in her hand, she went slowly down the five pairs of stairs and entered the concierge's *loge*. Old François was seated before a little stove, and in the full enjoyment of his primitive meal—consisting of a couple of “pistolets” and a huge cup of boiling coffee that smelt strongly of chicory.

He started and rubbed his sleepy eyes at sight of his visitor at so early an hour; but with the gallantry peculiar to the lower class in France, he jumped up, and hastily wiping a chair offered it to her.

Quita shook her head, with a ghost of a smile that did not hide the quiver on her mouth.

"*Bon jour, François.*"

"*Bon jour, petite dame!*"

"I have a letter here which you must promise to deliver as soon as possible. I am going away now," she said hoarsely.

"Going away! but not for long?"

"For always, François."

He looked at her wistfully. Somehow it seemed like parting with his own child. She had come into his little place like a sunbeam, and chatted to him and cheered him up, and he would miss her now; but his sleepy old orbs were still sharp enough to detect that the shadow of some poignant grief lay on the large pretty brown eyes and sweet red mouth—a grief that had best be left alone.

"I will give the letter directly, *petite dame*. Is it to *Monsieur le mari*?"

"No—oh no!" she answered, choking back a sob.

"To whom then?" he asked, his little failing of curiosity getting the better of him.

And in spite of herself—in spite of her innocence of evil—Quita coloured crimson as she replied :

"It is for the English gentleman in the *entresol*—Monsieur Adair!"

The concierge started in amazement for an instant, then his sense of humour overcame his sense of delicacy, and he screwed up his lips to hide a smile.

"It was not a priest after all, then, that madame was seeking!" he said jocosely.

She felt the doubt, and big tears welled up into her eyes.

"Even the old man suspects me. I must have guilt written on my face," she thought.

"Monsieur Adair is my cousin, François, and I have written to wish him adieu, as I shall never see him again. You will be sure and give him the letter this morning."

"In half-an-hour. Is there nothing more I can do for madame?"

"Nothing, François, nothing. Good-bye, *mon brave*." And she forgot all her pride and reserve in the recollection that she had no friends—not one single one—to say good-bye to, save the old concierge, and held out her little hand.

He looked at it a moment doubtfully. It was so dainty and so white, so like a tiny morsel of rare china, that he was half afraid to touch it with his great rough fist; so he bent down and touched the pretty pink-tipped fingers with his lips; and when he lifted up his face she saw that his lips were trembling and his old eyes were moist and ashamed.

"Adieu, *petite dame*! If François can do anything for you at any time, he will," he said in a gulpy voice.

Quita nodded her head, she could not

peak ; then, hastily pulling down her veil, she went into the street.

Three hundred francs in cash were in her possession—the balance of a sum Max had given her for housekeeping—and this, with a few jewels that had belonged to her mother, besides one or two rings given by Mrs. Adair and Erroll on birthdays, formed the sum-total of her worldly goods and chattels.

Leaving the Rue de Rivoli, she walked hastily down the Rue Castiglione. “Max could never have loved her, or he could not have deserted her like this, without explanation ;” this was the bitter refrain of her thoughts as she went. There was no future for her, she knew—only the past, which she wanted to forget. And yet she lingered at the corner of the street, and looked back in the direction of the hotel,

where she had lived, and suffered, and experienced a strange and bitter feeling of regret. She was a thorough woman, and a woman's heart is full of vagary, especially when it feels sore and wounded, even while it knows itself to be tender, and loyal, and true.

She trudged along, carrying her valise, with a heavy heart and a sorely-crushed spirit, and unconsciously turned up the boulevards which at that early and unfashionable hour were devoted to the milkmen, and newsvendors, and white-capped women on marketing thoughts intent. Arriving at last at a dingy street that ran off the Boulevard Montmartre, she saw a little card with "Appartement garni," stuck up on a petty grocer's, and entering, struck what, in her supreme ignorance of Parisian housekeeping, she considered a bargain; and found herself located in an

airy attic, in close neighbourhood with the saucy Parisian sparrows, for which accommodation she had to pay eight francs a week. There was a tiny bed in one corner; and a square deal table, a rickety chair, a cracked mirror, and some damaged crockery made up the list of furniture.

But besides these there was something of great account—shelter! What more could any reasonable creature, whose whole worldly property consisted of the sum of three hundred francs and a few trinkets, aspire to?

Yet as she sat down on the rickety chair, and glanced round the room, a very dreary, desolate, wretched feeling crept over her. Brought up in the enervating atmosphere of luxurious Queenscourt, with everything that her heart had desired and her tongue asked for, and all bestowed with lavish

hands, she was scarcely a fit subject to be content with that scanty draughty attic, in the purlicus of the Boulevard Montmartre.

She did not cry, poor little soul! Tears, those enormous panaceas of woe to women, were denied her; they only seemed to burn, burn at her weary eyeballs, but quite refused to fall; and as it flashed suddenly across her brain how many endless days and nights lay before her in which no possible spark of joy or comfort could come, Quita forgot it was wicked, and, dropping down on her knees on the carpetless floor, she sent up a pitcous little prayer that death might come to her.

Everything seemed to have gone wrong with her in life; in death surely she might hope for a little peace, a little rest. The next day, and the next, and for weeks

that lengthened into a couple of months, she existed, however, and thereby proved the truth of the saying, that the term "existence" is in nowise synonymous with the term "life."

Mechanically she slept, because mother nature forced it; and mechanically, for the same reason, she eat and she drank; and she might have been a fossil or a vegetable, for all her feelings had begun to settle down into a cold and apathetic despair.

She had little of the wherewithal to support life about her, and her absence from "home" was for an unlimited period; and the most astute of arithmeticians would have signally failed in solving the problem of making those two facts fit with one another.

One day she took out her purse and counted up all her wealth, and with a

dismayed face discovered just two glittering louis, and no more. When the last of the Mohicans was gone she stared around her shabby chamber blankly, and wondered a little what on earth was to become of her.

She dreaded parting with her attic, meagre as it was, in which she had locked herself in with her tears, and the tiny bed, with its bulgy flock mattress and hard pillow, on which her weary head had found quiet, at any rate, if not rest.

But in spite of vain longings to quit this vale of tears, human beings cling to life—even to the shady side of it—and Quita was no exception to the rule.

She resolved to go out into the city, that looked so remarkably fair, and bright, and smiling, and to try and find—not an El Dorado—but some woman, some good Samaritan, well to do and prosperous, who

might take compassion on a sister woman and let her earn her bread. She had not the slightest idea how to labour with her hands, and to beg she was ashamed. "Caste" stuck in her way as she thought of begging for alms; but tired, footsore, and hungry (she had had nothing to eat all day but a morsel of dry bread), she turned, in the waning light of a dull autumnal day, into the well-known and famous atelier of "Coralie," over which flaunted a placard with "Modiste à la Reine d'Angleterre" inscribed thereon.

Coralie, artiste, as she called herself, was an exquisite dressmaker, but far removed from being the good Samaritan that Quita was in search of; nevertheless, from an interested motive, as Paris was full and workers slack, she hearkened urbanely to the little English girl's earnest solicitation for work, and gave her some, difficult and

tedious of accomplishment, and with a remuneration that was a disgrace to the donor.

But before the work could be taken away Madame required some security.

Upon this Quita's white face fell and went several shades whiter, and quite a frightened feeling stole over her.

She thought of old François, the concierge; perhaps he might be sufficient recommendation. Then recollecting that to seek him she would have to go back to the hotel where Erroll might still be staying, and perchance meet him even, she put the idea of François aside at once.

It was an awful thing to stand there, without a franc in the wide wide world. She was faint from fasting and could barely articulate :

"I have no security to give, madame, only this——"

And she slipped off from her thin finger a wedding-ring, and held it towards the woman wistfully.

Madame Coralie laughed as she looked at the poor little circlet of gold.

“Not worth anything to me, *mon enfant!* and not worth much to you either, judging by appearances; but put it on again, I suppose I must trust you.”

And marking with her sharp worldly eyes the honesty imprinted on every feature of the pale aristocratic face, madame was inwardly satisfied that her trust would never be betrayed.

So, laden with satin, and silks to embroider it, Quita went home with a lighter heart, and worked from morn till night; and though her cheeks grew hollow and the hectic on them burned brighter, and deep bistre shades came under her eyes, and a sharp cough broke on the silence of the

night, she contrived to earn enough to keep body and soul together, but no more. She wanted to live now. She knew that in a little while she would not be quite alone—a baby face would smile up in her own, and tiny waxen fingers cling to hers. And perhaps Max would come back to his child, if he did not care to come back to his wife!

These were the hopes and yearnings that made her work.

Then in one of her visits to Coralie, a glimpse of her old life—the life that had begun to seem almost like a dream—came to her.

She stood—shabbily attired in an old cashmere gown and long waterproof, and her face veiled—in a corner of the large shop, waiting for Madame's will and pleasure to hand her the few francs, grudgingly doled out and thankfully received — when her

attention was aroused by the voices of two of Coralie's shop-girls.

"*Tiens ! La belle Anglaise !*" cried one.

"*Oui ! Elle est la mode—partout.*"

Quita mechanically looked towards the door, and her eyes grew fastened—eagerly and feverishly—on two ladies who had just entered.

One of them was of that age that is not easily guessed at, averaging from an "old" thirty-five to a "well-preserved" fifty. She had a pleasant fair face, with bright black eyes, and a quantity of hair *frisé* in Cavalier's best style. The other was young and tall, and straight and stately as a poplar, with the form of an empress, and a heap of costly lace floating about her dainty form.

They swept slowly up the room—giving their orders like a brace of queens—and finally halted within earshot of the spot

where, in the partial gloom of a late autumnal day, the little figure in black stood trembling like a leaf.

She had recognised her enemy in the twinkling of an eye, but if she had been as blind as a mole, instinct would have told her who it was.

"What have you decided on after all, Circe?" asked Lady Walgrave, in her quaint Frenchified accents.

"On an exquisite sage-green robe, with a Louis-Quinze bodice of terra-cotta velvet, and a chapeau Giotto of chantilly, with a cluster of the palest daffodils. Won't it be intense?" Mrs. Adair murmured languidly.

"Intensely ridiculous, my dear!" laughed her companion. "You will look like an Australian paroquet, or some ornithological marvel. I wonder you did not have a wisp of straw and a few infant sunflowers for

coiffure—it would have been truly æsthetic, you know. But don't you want furs?"

"Scarcely—for Italy."

"When do you start?"

"In about a fortnight."

"Where's the husband?"

"*Sais pas!*" replied the loving wife, with a shrug of her shoulders. "Cruising in his new yacht, the Snowflake; probably in company with that cousin of his, whom he has fallen in love with—too late!"

"Cousin? Who do you mean—not Mrs. Vereker?"

"The very same."

"But where's Max Vereker, then?"

"How you are behind the world, *très chère!* Didn't you know that 'Max the Bohemian,' as his brother calls him, had gone to Rome to make himself famous? He found that art was a more interesting study than nature, I conclude, and sickened of that

white-faced piece of simplicity he married—so he left her."

"Poor little thing!" Lady Walgrave said kindly; and Quita's heart warmed as she heard.

"It was the natural consequence of such a marriage. You can't expect an imperial eagle to mate long with a homely sparrow," ejaculated Mrs. Adair contemptuously. "It would be too utterly utter!"

"Perhaps the imperial eagle would find the homely sparrow a more gentle helpmate than the ornithological marvel we were talking about," Lady Walgrave said meaningly.

Mrs. Adair made a little *moue*, and turned to examine a magnificent cloak that lay on the counter.

"That is our very last *confection*, madame," murmured Coralie in a fawning voice. "It is the result of a dream—a

true artist's dream! You will pardon me for having called it after you. The 'Manteau Adair' is the rage of Paris!"

Lady Walgrave laughed.

"The 'Manteau Adair' is the *snappiest* thing I have seen," she said, mimicking her friend's jargon. "What it is to be a professional beauty, Circe! Your face and figure staring back at you from the shop windows; your coiffure copied by the coryphées and cocottes and grisettes; your name ticketed to mantles and hats and crinolettes; the gaping crowd envying you such honour and glory; and the men—by-the-way, where are the men to-day? I saw De Miromesnil and Longueville St. Clair hovering near your door, and a leviathan bouquet of sunflowers and lilies, labelled with the Count Montebello's card, in your ante-room. But Lord Wortlebury and Cortland are defectors. That little Mrs.

Dare has carried Cortland off from his allegiance, and holds him fast ; but what he can see in so much paint and powder I cannot imagine ! Now, I must confess that *your* face is all your own, by right divine, and not by purchase !”

“One would not be so foolish as to try and paint the lily,” murmured Mrs. Adair, with supreme conceit. “I threw over Lord Wortlebury because he wasn’t worth keeping ; he is such a silly boy, that any woman could make him run away with her for the asking. And as for the Duke of Cortland, he was jealous.”

“Jealous ! Of whom ?”

“Of Max Vereker.”

Quita’s heart stood still.

“Circe !”

Lady Walgrave armed herself with her lorgnon, and stared keenly at her companion.

“Has the fact of Mr. Vereker being in Italy anything to do with your movements a fortnight hence?”

Mrs. Adair pretended deafness.

Slightly colouring, she began intently examining the superb chef-d'œuvre, the true artist's dream, called “Manteau Adair;” and, in truth, she did more; for, to evade answering, she called one of the attendants and purchased the cloak for the modest sum of three thousand francs.

And Quita, who stood hard by, had thirty francs in her shabby little purse!

For in this wicked world, the daughters of Heth often flourish while their poorer sisterhood are crushed to the earth.

But Lady Walgrave was a good-hearted woman, and she was not to be put off; and at the first opportunity she returned to the subject.

“I hope my conjecture is not a true one,

Circe ; I believe you always had a fancy for that man."

"True !"

The one word flashed out distinctly, and cut like a lash into the soul of the poor little girl, who listened now with bated breath and a sick heart.

"What is it you fancy in him so much—his handsome face ?"

"He satisfies my yearning after the inner culture ; he is too utterly soul stirring ! Have you never felt a thrill of pure enjoyment pass through you on experiencing a direct stimulation from an external object ?"

"Talk sense, my dear Circe. You know Max Vereker has never cared for you."

"True !"

"Then why put yourself in his way ?"

"Because, *chère amie*, you remember the old proverb—*While there's life there's hope !*"

And Mrs. Adair gave an evil laugh.

Quita waited to hear no more. Picking up the few francs Madame had laid on the counter beside her, she tottered into the street.

A few lamps burned with a sickly light, and the night air swept past her, chilling her thinly-clad limbs. It was all dreary and desolate; but hunger, fatigue, everything was forgotten.

"I will save Max from that woman—from Jael—if I can," she muttered, as she hurried back to her lonely attic.

It was close upon morning when she dropped into a restless feverish sleep; and in her dreams she saw Jael's lovely face with its ivory tints and slumberous eyes; and Jael's white arms went round Max while she strangled him with her blood-red tresses—smiling, smiling all the while.



CHAPTER II.

L'ANGÉLIQUE.

"She walks the waters like a thing of life,
And seems to dare the elements to strife."

MADAME CORALIE had been niggardly in her payment; but with strictest economy and scantiest comfort, the little lonely lodger of the Quartier Montmartre contrived to clear off all scores and to start in impatient haste for Marseilles. It was something to reach even the port that led Max's way. But at Marseilles Quita fell ill.

Delicate to frailness, existing in almost privation, there yet came to her a moment of genuine overwhelming joy, when she clasped her little one in her arms—a small white fragile creature, whose tiny face was like a white blossom.

“I shall not have you long,” she would whisper through blinding tears, when her first great joy was sobered. “I wish Max could have seen you; perhaps it would have softened his heart towards me.” And then she fell to thinking of Max and how she could reach him; and in that feverish longing she grieved less when they took the child away from her and covered it with rosebuds—fit emblems of itself—and laid it to sleep under the emerald turf. Some days afterwards, Quita, cloaked and closely veiled, so as to be quite unrecognisable, stepped on board the vessel that was to carry her towards her husband.

L'Angélique weighed her anchor ; her steam gushed upwards in a cloud ; her paddles sent the silvery spray right up into the air ; and the port of Marseilles faded insensibly from view.

On she went with the wind and tide, until the sun dropped low to westward, and battlements of purple cloud, streaked with crimson, told that another day had sunk into the unalterable past. For the space of an hour the big yellow moon lit up vessel and wave, touching both with a mellow splendour ; while myriads of silver stars hung silent and watchful in the huge sapphire firmament. Then suddenly their light was gone, and Diana, like a chaste maiden, covered her face with a shadowy cloud.

All was quiet and peaceful, and everyone on board the little craft slept soundly and trustfully. Quita had stolen to her berth

through the unheeding crowd, and, weary and worn, slumbered like an infant. Who can solve the mysteries of mind and matter, and tell how many of those sleeping creatures were lost in happy dreams? But even while they slept and dreamt the angels above were expanding their white wings wide to carry disembodied spirits from this gross earth heavenward.

In the midst of the apparently safe and tranquil hour peril to the voyagers was rife, and the dread fiat of human life and death sounded from Jehovah in one crash of thunder that seemed to rend the air; whilst lightning with vivid gleams lit up the sea for many and many a league with blinding glare. In a little while more the wind storm lashed the already angry waves into greater fury, and made them dash higher and higher each moment against the luckless vessel.

Then there came a momentary lull—an ominous lull—that eased her, but only to feel doubly the herculean surge sweep violently over her like a deluge, threatening to pluck up plank by plank. The storm raged overhead ; it blew the stiffest, hardest gale that had been known for many a year, and the cruel rollers kept toppling over the steamer, each gigantic billow with a crest of milk-white foam, as if snow-crowned, while the victim wallowed helplessly and hopelessly in its trough of cruel sea.

L'Angélique began to creak and groan heavily as the ruthless water struck hard blows on her sides again and again, and swept mercilessly over the half-clad shivering forms of the luckless women and children who, with blanched scared faces, huddled closely together, clinging wildly to the ropes and bulwarks with a strong

grasp of fear ; and over them an awestruck silence reigned, unbroken save by a short and frantic prayer that went up now and then from some pallid lip to God.

Driven like so much chaff before the pitiless fury of the elements, the steamer drifted here and there, anywhere and everywhere but in her right course. The hours grew on towards the break of dawn, but the billows did not stay their course, rolling on and on in quick succession, one moment yawning widely asunder, the next menacing to close together and engulf their prey, that appeared to shrink away from them, and to shake and tremble as the fierce boulders approached. Dark clouds drove swiftly through the sky, the storm waxed more violent, the paddles dipped deeper and deeper in the seething brine, the bow bent lower and lower, and no voice could be heard through the shrieking hurricane.

Struggles for dear life redoubled, but the vessel grew quite unmanageable. On, on she flew; one instant lifted like a monster seagull on the topmost crest of a huge mountain-wave, the next staggering and reeling like a drunkard, or a living creature convulsed in throes of mortal agony, then falling back heavily into her wide bed of boiling billows.

Another shock, another low plunge into the dark and troubled depths, with her frame all quivering as if wrenched asunder, and then a wild unearthly sound echoing through the air.

It was a fearful cry—a cry of “*Fire!*”

Even a watery grave seemed preferable to the mad horror of being devoured by that fearful fiery scourge.

A boat was launched by half-a-dozen desperate men, and a rush of affrighted beings made for it.

It filled and—*founded*!

In the twinkling of an eye many an erring soul was launched into eternity.

A second boat was lowered, and with a heavy freight went on its perilous way.

Then a man, who had retained his presence of mind throughout, got into a third and smaller craft—almost a cockle-shell—with one or two sailors.

Looking up towards the doomed vessel, as the boat was leaving it, Erroll Adair—for it was he—saw through the misty dawn a sight that curdled his blood. It was a human figure, a solitary human creature, standing on the fatal planks of that burning deck!

“Hold!” he shouted to the men who were hurriedly pulling to get a wider berth from the danger. “There’s someone left behind, and we must pull back at once.”

His voice was loud and authoritative,

and even in that hour of imminent risk had weight with those who heard.

They hesitated an instant—brave men though they were—dear life and an awful death were in the balance; but they hesitated only for that instant. After one backward glance their strong brawny arms pulled back to the doomed steamer's side.

A frail form, robed all in white, with long chestnut hair streaming on the wind, with uplifted eyes and firm clasped hands, seemed to hover like an angel midway 'twixt heaven and sea.

A sailor's stentorian voice bade her come down the ladder; but in spite of the little red tongues of curling flame that had burst out from the stern, she stood—poor soul!—dazed, motionless, as if fearful of the watery grave that yawned widely below. Erroll gazed a moment, panic-

struck, stunned; then he reeled forward, perilling the little craft, his arms thrown wildly up, his face convulsed as if with mortal agony.

“Oh my God! Quita!”

That voice!

The voice she had listened to and obeyed from childhood. The voice that had power to thrill her now, even at the gates of Eternity. In another instant she was safe in those outstretched arms, and Erroll held her close—his darling with the faithful eyes and gleaming hair—

“His love who loved him so,

His love who loved him years ago.”

And holding her thus, a happiness came to him beneath the wild skies and amidst the deadly danger, that he had never known before.

As morning grew on, there lay the port

of Marseilles once more, but leagues upon leagues away, and yet so near that it seemed doubly hard to die.

The storm still howled aloud, the thunder pealed, and the fell waters rose darkly up, falling again with ominous roar, while the spray sprang upwards like silver sheen.

The billows kissed for a moment, but to separate again as if in wrath, sending up ebullitions of anger in their white seething foam.

At last, after buffeting valiantly with the implacable sea, the drenched crew of the craft yielded up all hope of freedom from peril, and the stoutest heart amongst them sank at the prospect that each gigantic wave that rocked them on its crest was probably the precursor of death.

"Is there no hope?" inquired a voice, low but not tremulous; for, somehow, Quita was not afraid to die.

It might have been because life had not shown its brightest colours to her.

“God knows !” Erroll answered. His face was ashy white, and his voice shook, but not from fear.

He had been looking his last on the girl he loved, and wishing her in his soul a long farewell.

“I shall die happy—but *you*—you will die so far away from Max !” he said bitterly.

She looked up at him and met the eyes that were fixed upon her with such passionate yearning—the love in his breast was patent enough now.

Now, when it was too late ! too late !

“Quita ! will you kiss me once—just once—before we die ? It will harm no one, and it will give me strength to face death calmly. Max will not even know of it.”

It was true what he said !

They were together on that raging sea—

she and the hero of her childhood. The king of her girlhood—the dream of her young life. He loved her now. And she—well! she had loved him so—loved him so much, that *without* him—she had used to pray for death. One kiss—one *little* kiss—just to take away on her lips into that realm of dark shadow—where only faith can pierce and only love can follow!

“Max will never, *never* know it!” pleaded Erroll once more. And his whisper fell distinct midst the howling wind and swishing waves.

“*Max.*”

With that name he had called her back to earth.

Until death her lips belonged to Max. She had sworn it on her bended knees. She dared not go to her grave a foul and perjured woman.

“No! no!” she cried, turning from the

pleading eyes, the clinging arms. "Oh God ! grant me strength ! Max—— !"

A monster wave swept over the boat, and all on board of her were engulfed in the cruel raging sea.





CHAPTER III.

PÈRE JOSEPH.

“His life was gentle, and the elements
So mixed in him, that nature might stand up
And say to all the world : ‘This was a man !’”

“WHERE am I ?”

The words came in a faint and broken whisper, from a pair of poor white lips, as Quita’s brown eyes wandered about vacantly over the small rude cabin in which, on a pile of sails, she had laid for three whole days in a stupor, which might have been taken for death. Two Marseilles fishermen had been her saviours from a watery grave,

and the wife of one of them looked at her pityingly as she spoke.

"Pauvre petite ma'mselle!"

She lifted up her weary head, stared hard at the honest, good-tempered, but hard-featured face of the woman crouching by a log-fire cooking potatoes; and then she fell back on her coarse pillow unconscious.

"Pierre! bring the good old priest, for the love of the blessed Virgin!" cried his wife hastily, in the drawling patois peculiar to Marseilles; "the poor child is about to die!"

Pierre—a great muscular young fisherman, with unkempt tawny locks and brawny arms, and a heart as good as gold—who had been stretched at full length smoking a pipe just outside the cabin, hastened to do his helpmate's bidding; and when Quita aroused once more from her long faint, the tall spare form and

silver-crowned head of a priest met her gaze.

He went up to the impromptu rude couch and bent over her. Something in her face—all white, and wan, and faded as it was, with the brown eyes quenched, and the glorious lustre of the long chestnut hair all dimmed—made him start perceptibly, as though some faint chord in memory had been suddenly struck. For a minute or two he stood silently regarding her; then he shook his head.

That vague intangible link with an old, old life, faded right away into black chaos, and all he saw was a frail young creature, that the mighty waves had restlessly tossed to and fro, before they yielded her up to life. A girl with a face as snowy and as pure as a lily; her slender figure all robed in white, outlined against the rough dark log walls; hair that made a nimbus of glory

round her head. At the moment he could liken her to nothing save the Angel of the Annunciation.

It was evident, however, that upon her death had not yet laid his seal, and the world might yet become dear to her.

He had little to do with such souls. His work for many a year had been with the dying; his office to cheer the path to the grave. And as he reflected thus, he prepared to leave the room, but the brown eyes met his own, wearily and wistfully, and arrested his steps.

She looked so young and so desolate, so unfit to struggle back to life and health, with none but rough though kindly hearts and hands around her.

Was she good or bad—rich or poor—wife or maid? He did not think of wondering even; all he saw was a fellow-creature, a poor little waif that the tossing sea had

flung back on mother earth, white and crushed and sorrowful—and a great pity filled his heart.

“Are you better, *mon enfant*?”

“Yes.”

“Can I do anything for you?”

“Where am I, *mon père*?”

“In a fisher’s cabin, near Marseilles.”

“Ah, I want something!” she murmured.

“Command me then.”

“I want a paper—a newspaper of Marseilles, *mon père*. A paper with the account of *L’Angélique* in it.”

“*L’Angélique*! Why, that is the little steamer that was lost four days ago, with all on board of her.”

Quita’s face blanched, and she shivered.

“There was someone she loved on board, poor child!” he thought pitifully, as he watched the pallor sweep over her cheeks.

“I want to see the account, *mon père*,”

she repeated, so earnestly that he went out at once to do her behest.

The town of Marseilles was but a quarter of a league from the small hamlet inhabited by the fishermen, and in a short time the old man returned.

Seizing the paper eagerly, and spreading it out, Quita raised herself on one arm and ran her forefinger quickly over the list of names.

“*Madame Vereker, Anglaise.*”

After this, she let the sheet drop to the floor, and sank back with closed lids, through which one or two tears fell down.

“What will Max feel when he sees that?” she wondered. “Will he be glad, or will he regret me? Will grief for my death make him think better—more kindly—of me? or will he still believe that I was false to him? I *must* see him without his seeing me. I must read on his face whether

the loss of me brings him joy or woe. But how shall I get to him? All is gone! Everything! Ah my God!"

Remembrance of Erroll rushed in a great tide over her. And who could blame her for the pang with which she pictured him as he was—so bright and so handsome; so blessed with fortune, and youth, and all the good gifts of life—and as he might be now: his sunlit hair all damp and dank; his blue eyes with their beauty gone out of them; his white face and rigid form rocked by the cruel billows in a last long sleep?

"Don't cry, *mon enfant*! Ask Heaven to give you comfort!" said the priest gently.

"Perhaps the one you mourn may be saved, like yourself."

"Pray God he may! But I have no time to grieve, *mon père*," she went on feverishly; "I have a duty before me, a task to accomplish, which must be done. I

must start for Italy to-morrow—to-day, if possible.” And she rose, pushing back from her temples the thick masses of hair that fell like a veil around her. “But how—how shall I get there? I have nothing left—nothing!”

She dropped her face on her hands, while the old man watched her, wondering, and believing her brain wandered.

Suddenly she looked up.

“Stay; this will take me!” she cried, putting her hand up to her neck.

Baptista, the fisherman’s wife, had loosened her white wrapper to give her air, and her throat gleamed up like marble, but there was nothing round it.

“It is gone!” she murmured hopelessly.

“Is it this, *mon enfant?*” asked the priest, bringing her a thin gold chain with a chased medallion attached to it.

She almost snatched it from his hand in her joy at recovering it. It was the sole means left her of reaching her husband.

“Oh, *mon père*, you are good and kind ! Will you take this to the town, and get money upon it—not much—only enough to take me to him, to pay my way to where he is ?”

He was supposed to be lying fathoms deep in the blue Mediterranean, and the old man began to think that it was to a mind diseased he had been called to minister.

Or, supposing she was sane, and *he* was alive, perchance he would be aiding and abetting in a carnal sin if he assisted her to reach him.

Quita noticed the perplexed expression on his face. Surely, surely he was not wavering ? She felt that he was her only hope.

“I want to go to my husband, *mon père*.

He is on the verge of a great danger, from which I can save him, perhaps," she said earnestly and sanely enough. "That locket will procure me the money for my journey."

He took it and examined the exquisite chasing, a work peculiar to a country that he had known well in earlier years. And as he looked at the lid, accidentally he struck the little spring and the trinket opened.

It nearly fell from his hand, while his features worked strangely.

"The portraits of Zoë de Vargas," he cried, "and of—of—*myself*! How are they in your possession, *mon enfant*? It is like witchcraft!"

And he put the locket down on the table, eyeing it suspiciously.

Quita gazed at him bewildered for a moment. Then she sprang from her rough couch of sails, her cheeks flushed, her eyes

flashing, and in another instant her arm was round the old man's neck.

"Père Joseph! Père Joseph! have you forgotten your little Quita?" she said betwixt laughing and crying; while with his trembling hands he smoothed back her rebellious tresses, and turning up her face keenly scrutinised it.

"Oh, *mon oncle*, how glad I am to find you! Maman bade me seek you if ever I wanted a friend—and I want a friend so much! I have not one in the wide wide world now!" And putting her head down on his knee the poor child sobbed bitterly.

He soothed her as well as he was able, and in a few moments she grew calmer.

"I thought I had seen your face before directly I looked on it," he murmured. "It is not like Zoë's, but it is like our sister Mariquita's. She was fragile and like a

lily-blossom, just as you are; and she had large brown eyes, like an antelope—like you have, *petite*."

"How long have you left Jamaica, *mon oncle*? I wish I had been you to have looked once more on the *cimetière* in the mango tope, where poor maman and papa are sleeping. Ah well, they are happy, any way; for they have the peace and rest only death can bring them."

"And has not life brought you any peace or rest, little Quita?"

"Not much," she said, in a low voice, thinking of Max.

"Has love been a blessing or a curse to you?"

"Not a curse—not a curse! for he loved me *sometimes*, but not always," she replied sorrowfully.

"Pauvrette!"

It was her mother's name for her in

her childhood, and the dear old familiar word brought a thrill to her heart.

"Yet I wish to find him again!" she went on after a moment. "Listen, *mon oncle!* There is a wicked woman on this earth!"

"*Hélas!* a great many wicked women!" he broke in.

"And she will take him from me, and drag him down to misery; for he is good and noble, and sin and Max could not live together! She has a black heart, but her face is beautiful—beautiful as an angel's!"

"Those wicked women are mostly beautiful, little Quita. Beauty is their chief weapon to do evil with," he said regretfully.

"But he does not love her—*yet!* That is in my favour," she murmured wistfully.

"But he *will*. Since the days of Solomon

men have gone blind and mad over a beautiful face, Pauvrette."

"True. Yet if I could see him once again I might keep him from temptation. He loved me, I believe—not always, but sometimes—sometimes! It is my duty to save him from *her*, Père Joseph!"

"Then it must be done. But you shall not go alone on your righteous cause. You must not go among the ravening wolves, my little white lamb, while these old arms of mine can bring you protection. Your mother left you to my care in a letter she wrote before her death, and I have not been unmindful of it. I have sought for you long, but I had forgotten the address of your father's relatives, and could not write to you. Heaven be praised, I have found you at last!"

She rose from her knees by his side and planted a loving kiss on his furrowed cheek.

“Oh, I thank the good God who has raised up a friend in my sore need. I am not desolate now, and shall seek *him* with a brave heart. We must go to-morrow, *mon oncle*. We must start not later than sunrise if we can.”

“So be it, *mon enfant*, and may Heaven smile on our cause!”

Quita flung herself down again on her knees and put up two clasped hands. Her eyes looked upwards, and a little smile parted her lips.

“I am coming, Max!” she said dreamily, in a low soft voice.





CHAPTER IV.

MADAME—IS DEAD !

“All was ended now—the hope, the fear, and the
sorrow ;
All the aching of heart, the restless unsatisfied longing ;
All the dull deep pain.”

LINGERING on and on in the lovely imperial city, in absolute solitude and bitterness of spirit, Max Vereker's feelings seemed to outwear themselves as it were. Fire will not burn on for ever without the aid of fuel ; and so, when incidents trivial, yet all-convincing to his feverish mind, had ceased to stimulate jealousy and suspicion, a little voice—the small voice of conscience,

or it might have been of remorse—began to whisper in his ear that perchance he had been too hasty in condemnation, too summary in action after all.

The entire loss of *L'Angélique* had been, like everything else in this sublunary sphere, but a nine days' wonder, and it had been forgotten utterly, save by a few sorrowing hearts, whose depths had been harrowed by the loss of some near and dear object in the poor doomed vessel.

In France and in England, the daily papers, always greedy to clutch at any fresh matter with which to fill their columns, had teemed with soul-rending accounts, sensational incidents, and highly-coloured illustrations of the disaster; but none of these journals had got so far as Italy, and save a few cursory words, devoid of details, the residents in Rome had been left in ignorance of the event.

Paris, to Max, was an accursed town. It was there his life, as it were, had been broken in twain, leaving a gap between the past and the future which was just chaos and nothing more. There, too, he was afraid of running counter to those whose evil passions he believed had worked his woe.

To see his wife with another man he knew would drive him mad ; and, shuddering, he chased away the very thought of such a horrible ordeal. But even in fancy the idea dogged his footsteps like a fell fiend, turning his life into ashes, and making the whole world seem a veritable desert, on which there was not one green spot—no, not one !

Society he hated more than ever ; and, eschewing everyone, he lived from day to day feeding on his misery, and wondering how long it was willed that he should exist

in a state of blankness which might be death itself.

Then one evening came D'Albret.

Max happened to be out, flitting like a disturbed spirit in the environs of the city, as was his wont when the dark shadows concealed his identity from all eyes. But he hastened to return D'Albret's visit. For somehow the man seemed to be the only link between the present and that past which, full of misery as it was, filled the first place in his memory; for, with all the wretchedness, it had yet contained the only real happiness he had known.

Moore tells us that

You may crush, you may ruin the vase if you will,
But the scent of the roses will cling to it still.

And thus it was that the ruined past held a potent spell over Max that no power on earth could cast off.

D'Albret had gone out for an hour, so they told Max, and he resolved to wait.

Waiting was nothing to him, he liked to sit and brood; he loved to be by himself, for he was never *alone*; Quita's face was always beside him; her eyes looked into his own, her voice sounded in his ear like the echo of some harmony that his soul had revelled in years and years gone by; and her likeness would grow beneath his finger on every scrap of paper that chanced to be near—but always as Hermia, the nymph whom Lycellius had loved and flung aside. And all the while something, like a familiar footstep in a deserted hall, appeared to pass over his heart.

Max had a nature unlike most men's. He was steadfast and loyal unto death; and though he had been driven like chaff before the wind, by the foul feelings of

suspicion and jealousy, his wife had never really fallen from the niche in his breast where he had placed her to love and to worship for ever and ever.

Deep in reverie, he started as D'Albret entered the room, and after the first cordial greetings, the two sat down face to face.

Max had terribly altered since D'Albret and he had worked side by side in the long galleries of the Louvre. A strange dreary and abstracted look had settled on his deep-blue eyes, and a white line of pain ran round his mouth and had grown habitual to it. Even in the pauses of conversation his spirit seemed to wander far away from the present.

"Was it," D'Albret asked himself, "by any chance lingering still on the past?"

"*Mon ami*," he said, after a little while, in a low tone, and with the colour coming and going on his olive cheek, "have

you by any means heard anything of—madame?”

Max’s arm, which rested on the table, trembled perceptibly, and a faint quiver passed over his mouth.

“No,” he answered, in as cold and calm a voice as he could manage to call up. “Of course I have heard nothing; and you?”

And, strong man as he was, wronged as he firmly believed himself to have been, he yet could not, for the life of him, control a quick wistful look.

Oh God! What human being could guess at the sharp tension of his heart when he even *thought* of her, much more when he might *hear* of her—she who yet lived for him, the one only woman in all the wide wide world?

“And have you heard nothing of madame’s—*amant*?”

The cruel, cruel word sent Max shivering like a leaf from head to foot, but he clenched his fist, and drew a deep breath.

“No! *Curse him!*”

“I have!” broke from D’Albret, in a hushed tone.

“*What* have you heard? Don’t tell me he *is dead*, for the love of Heaven!—that I can never slake this burning thirst for vengeance that drives me wild!”

D’Albret was silent.

“Speak out honestly and boldly, man! Let me hear the worst; and the worst would be that he had gone to his grave without my bitterest maledictions!”

“Max, call up the latter days when you found she was false—false as the falsest of her sex; and that memory will nerve you, will teach you that she was not the creature your imaginative mind made her, but a woman bad, nay vile, unworthy

of one tender thought from an honest man."

There was a dead silence for a few moments—almost a weird silence; and the clock ticked on just as it had done in Max's room at Surbiton, when Erroll, lying back idly in his lounge, sending up great rings of blue smoke, had volunteered to take charge of Quita at Queenscourt. Little things—even the ticking of a clock—bring back sometimes vividly the remembrance of some feeling or action in the days gone by. And Max, recollecting that day, smiled bitterly as he realised how completely Quita had been in Erroll Adair's charge since.

"Vereker, *mon cher*, I have something to tell you," D'Albret began, in a nervous flurried voice. "I do not think you ought to require any kind of preparation for my news—or courage to bear it. After all, what I have to say should be excellent tidings, as

it is the best thing that could have happened—best for you, and best for—her! You see, Max, that however good and pure a woman's real tendencies may be, *c'est le premier pas qui coûte*—and she usually falls lower and lower. It is marvellous how quickly women go to the devil after the first downward slide.”

Max jumped up from his seat and laid his hand on D'Albret's shoulder.

“For God's sake!—unless you want to kill me outright—don't tell me that that villain has deserted her, and left her to become——”

He dropped back into his seat and, unabashed, dashed away great drops from his eyes.

“No! no!” D'Albret cried, pitying him from his soul. “What I am going to tell you is something that should make you glad.”

“Glad! glad! That is a word that has gone out of my vocabulary. But go on—let me hear what the glad news is,” and Max gave a curt laugh.

Such a laugh it was—with utter desolation and weariness running through it—even to listen to it made the other man’s heart grow sick.

“Max, does there happen to be any woman here or elsewhere who has caught your fancy since *she* left you?—any woman, lovely, loving, true and good, who could make you forget the wound in the past, and brighten your future?”

Max laughed again. A louder laugh this time—a laugh that is born of disbelief in one’s kind, that comes of hopelessness and despair.

“You don’t know me, Victor. No woman living, were she lovely as Venus, pure as an angel, could make me forget the past,

which at times was the nearest approach to heaven that a man can reach. No woman, not one, could fill *her* place—ay, *shall* fill the place—which was hers—while I live. But why ask such questions? You must know that I am in no humour for banter now.”

“I asked because I *hoped* there was such a woman; and if there was I should have said to you, with all my heart, ‘*Mon ami*, go in and win. Thrust all care and trouble from you. Send memory to the four winds; for the cloud that has shadowed your life shows a rift in it at last. Life lies before you once more in rosy colours, for you are a free man!’”

“A free man!” repeated Max dreamily.

“A free man, for *she* can trouble you no more.”

“Trouble me no more!” he repeated.
“What *do* you mean?”

"I mean that God has taken up your cause, and snatched from your enemy that which should not have been his!"

Max had risen again and stood facing him; his eyes were wild, and articulation seemed denied him; but on every feature was written a mute question.

"Madame is—*dead!*" blurted out D'Albret, believing a shock would recall and nerve him, and drive the scared look from the eyes.

"Dead! dead!" shouted Max, like a maniac. The scared look in his eyes became vacant and wandering, and he stood like an image of stone in the centre of the room.

Quita in her sweet girlish beauty rose up before him, her brown eyes looked straight into his own, her soft childlike lips quivered piteously.

"Dead!" he repeated. And D'Albret knew he should never forget to the last

day of his life the tone in which the dread word was spoken.

Then Max fell prone across the table, his face bowed on his trembling arms; and there broke on the silence of the room another sound beside the ticking of the clock, a horrible harrowing sound; the sound of a deep, deep, tearless sob, wrung from a strong man's agony—and that sob was Quita's dirge.

Who knows but that he had unconsciously even fostered a hope, that—in spite of falsity and treachery, in spite of dishonour and disgrace—he might look on her face just once again?

But she was beyond his reach—she was—*dead!*

“Think of her mournfully,
Gently and humanly;
Not of the stain of her.
All that remains of her
Now is pure womanly.

Make no deep scrutiny
Into her mutiny.
Rash and undutiful,
Past all dishonour,
Death has left on her
Only the beautiful ! ”

“ Be a man, Max ! Recollect how utterly false she was—think how cruelly, ruthlessly she has dragged your name and your honour in the mud. Realise, I pray of you, the horror, the deep disgrace ! ”

Max slowly raised a white stricken face, and passed his shaking hand across his brow, as if to collect his thoughts. It was pitiful to see him. He seemed stupefied—dazed—and as if he scarcely comprehended the good thing that had befallen him.

At last he said, in a voice utterly unlike his own :

“ When did she—die ? ”

“ She was—drowned in *L'Angélique*, a steamer that was lost near Marseilles.”

“And—he ? Was he drowned ?”

“Yes.”

“He had the advantage over me even in death ! He died with her at his side ; her hand in his ; her voice on his ear. Oh God ! his lips to hers in a farewell kiss !” Max uttered in a hoarse wild voice.

“Max, I wonder at you grieving thus ! You ought to rejoice, you ought to be glad.”

“Who says I am not ?—who says I don’t rejoice ? It is a thousand, ten thousand times better to know she is dead—dead—*dead* !—than to know her alive and—his——”

He paced the room ; his lips livid ; his eyes bloodshot ; his face a complete wreck of itself.

“I am glad, upon my soul I am,” he went on in a loud shrill voice. “D’Albret, look how I laugh ! Have I not cause to

laugh and sing and dance, for I have the whole world clear before me now? That poor erring soul has fled, and left me free as the birds of the air to go where I will, without the horror of meeting her at every step. I have no past, no present, no future! All is a pleasant blank. I can eat and drink and be merry to my full heart; and, above all, I can love other women. Hurrah! hurrah! D'Albret, have you any brandy? Let us drink to my good fortune."

He walked up to the bureau, and pouring out some of the spirit, held up the glass.

Then with an awful smile on his lips, he bowed gravely to D'Albret.

"Here's to her—*death!*" he cried, draining the brandy to the dregs.

He flung down the glass, shivering it into atoms, and throwing open the window, gasped for air. D'Albret sat silent,

feeling that such grief could bear no comfort; and a little later, Max went out of the house, his step firm, his brow stern and cold, but his lip still smiling; and, as he neared his own door, a slight figure enveloped in a long cloak watched him with wistful yearning eyes.

There was no sign of regret on that handsome face, or on that *insouciant* lip.

"*Buona notte, signorina!*" he said lightly, as he passed.

And, with a sinking heart, Quita crept back to her shabby lodging, where she and Père Joseph were located.

"He has forgotten me already!" she said, in a broken sob.



CHAPTER V.

“LA BEAUTÉ SANS VERTU EST UNE FLEUR
SANS PARFUM.”

“Thy favours are but like the wind
That kisseth everything it meets;
And since thou canst with more than one,
Thou’rt worthy to be loved by none.
Such fate ere long will thee betide,
When thou hast handled been awhile
Like faded flowers be thrown aside.”

THE carnival in Rome—and the “maddest,
merriest time in all the glad new year.”

Masqueraders and dominos, pulchinellos
and pierrots, foolscaps and bells, roysterers
and women with flashing eyes and gleaming
teeth, and tiny tinkling feet, paraded the

streets from morn till night. And among all the lovely dark-eyed, sun-kissed-cheeked daughters of Italy, the loveliest woman was Mrs. Adair—as she leant over a gaily wreathed balcony ; her superb figure garbed in Coralie's bizarre costume of sage-green and terra-cotta, her face like an exquisite tropical flower, beneath its elegant chapeau Giotto, trimmed with clusters of palest daffodils. A number of men, with the best blood of the South, buzzed round her as flies buzz round a morsel of sugar—but just for the nonce she did not notice them, entering fully into the life of the scene—casting a coy look here, and a soft smile there, on each male passer in the street below—throwing bonbons and toys promiscuously on all—and flinging down costly blossoms on the handsome olive-skinned faces upturned in admiration of herself—and yet every now and then send-

ing a quick furtive glance behind in search of someone.

That someone had not put in an appearance, although the day was fleeting fast. Yet for some time he had been first in the field of gaiety, rushing into a vortex of amusement with the apparent eagerness and zest of a boy. It might have been but an effort of expiring nature to try and drive dull care from dogging his steps like a dark fiend; but, to a casual eye, Max had turned over a new leaf.

D'Albret—his Orestes, his very shadow—leant, however, against one of the carved iron pilasters of the balcony; his eyes resting on the bewitching beauty of his hostess, whom he saw for the first time since his arrival in Rome, now two months since. Like every other man—from noble to commoner—he had succumbed, at once, without a struggle, blindly and unresisting,

to the weird witchery of that fair face, with its ivory tints, its almond-shaped, white-lidded, odalisque eyes, and its coronal of gleaming and glowing hair.

And with that curious instinct that always tells a pretty woman the feelings she has inspired, Mrs. Adair, without turning her head, *felt* D'Albret's rapt gaze, and was pleased. True, he was not the rose; but *il avait vécu près d'elle*. So, indifferent to her swarm of adorers, and to the mortification and astonishment legibly expressed on the faces of Prince Spagnoletti, Il Duca di Rutiano, and a dozen of their aristocratic *confrères*, she singled out the poor and unknown artist, and, going up to him with her slow gliding sinuous step, so like a serpent's, spoke to him as was her wont with strange men, in words and manner which were far from conventional. Her ways were as bizarre as her beauty and

her toilette, and in that very unconventionality men found one of her greatest charms.

“Tell me, monsieur, am I at all what you expected to see?” she asked in a low *entrainante* voice, and with that lazy smile and intense look which owned a potent spell.

D’Albret did not attempt to remove his regard from her, although there was nothing of insolence or boldness in it; and replied slowly, like a man in a dream: “I expected to look on a peerless face, and therefore an answer would be superfluous.”

She did not blush or flush. London and Paris, Vienna and Rome, had all fallen in an adoring heap at the shrine of her beauty; and a compliment, more or less, fell on her as easily as water on a duck’s back.

Besides, at this moment she had lost herself in someone else.

"Who told you my face was peerless?
Was it Mr.—Vereker?"

She spoke the name as if she loved to dwell on each of the seven letters that it contained; and, even as she uttered it, D'Albret's sharp glance noted a little fitful wild-rose bloom that swept quickly over her ivory skin.

"She loves him!" he thought; "yet I am sure he does not love her! What fools men are! When they can win a gorgeous bird of paradise they look no higher than a little white dove, like Max's dead wife."

The gorgeous bird of paradise meanwhile waited eagerly for his reply. The thought that Max had lauded her beauty was a delicious incense that thrilled her veins like a draught of rosy burgundy.

"Yes, Vereker told me a little about you. Not much; for he is very reserved in his talk about women. But I heard

most from men at the club. You are Queen of Hearts in Rome, they say ; just as you were Queen of Hearts in London and Paris."

"Am I?" she said indifferently, with a disappointed crestfallen look. "Well, I don't know if the intelligence is much worth ; unless, indeed, it raises one in the estimation of a few, to have the admiration of the million."

D'Albret saw at once that she was thinking again of Max.

"*Omnia vincit amor*," he said to himself. "The hearts of these butterflies of fashion are usually of stone, but the little god has wedged himself in somehow."

"Some people are so thoroughly wrapped up in their dreams and thoughts that they have eyes and see not, and ears but hear not, like the wooden idols, you know, madame," he observed significantly.

She gave him a cool level glance, under her perfect lashes, and then laughed—a quiet kittenish laugh. She was not a clever woman, but she understood men, that is most men, *au bout des ongles*.

"I don't believe that, monsieur. There is not a man living whom a woman cannot bring to her feet, provided, of course, that she has opportunity, and is not a fool."

"Then you do not count your beauty—the beauty that has a world-wide fame—your best weapon?" he asked, staring at her, and thinking that a face like hers was more dangerous than a mad dog's bite.

"No—brains are ; and beauty, of course, helps. But there are men whom a clever Medusa would captivate more than a Venus."

"Bah !" he cried ; "that is a false idea. Men have gone blind and mad for

a woman's lovely face since the days of Solomon; and I don't believe we are a bit wiser in our generation."

"There are men and *men*, monsieur! Spagnoletti there, and Di Rutiano, and a whole kit of foolish fluttering moths would re-echo your sentiments; but there are others from whom 'a face' could not win one fleeting glance of passion, I believe," she said wistfully.

"Those others are fossils, not worth picking up, madame. Give me the Turk's paradise, black-eyed houris."

"Like that one down there—that little houri with the coquettish glances, and cheeks like Provence roses. How happy she looks!" And Mrs. Adair sighed a little as she rained down bonbons and the famous Mateo's finest cosaques on the object of her admiration with such a lavish hand, that the girl looked up and

dropped a low curtsy to the beautiful and imperial donor.

"Don't you see *why* she is happy, madame? It is because her lover is coming towards her. How radiant his good-looking young face is too! What a thing *love* is!"

"Yes, isn't it! A too—too—an intense commingling of human spirits—a sort of moral alcohol, that the more one drinks of the more one wants. But——"

She paused, bit her lips, and a heavy shadow flitted across her straight brow.

"Madame gets much more than she wants, I am sure," D'Albret said, in an earnest voice. His eyes devoured her face, and his inflammable Gallic heart was caught already, adding another to the already innumerable army of martyrs, who were forced to bear the cross she had laid upon them.

She looked up suddenly and met his

gaze. Something in her eyes—something indescribable, intense, almost a weird fire—made him colour. It was a peculiar expression which was often in them; but to a stranger it struck curiously, and seemed to speak volumes.

“I wonder if Mr. Adair will turn up in Rome?” she said, after a moment, *à propos* to nothing.

D’Albret started. *Mr. Adair!* He had heard of Mrs. Adair’s husband—someone who had lost his individuality in his wife; and he had heard that Mrs. Adair’s husband was drowned.

He had accepted the fact without consideration, and when his eye had marked (he was a bit of a connoisseur in feminine toilettes) the bizarre yet chic costume of sage-green and terra-cotta, he had simply decided that the period of widow’s mourning had expired.

"Mr. Adair! I thought he was——"

"Food for the fishes," she interrupted laughing; "not a bit of it; he isn't the man to go out of the world so quietly," she added, thinking that nought never comes to harm.

"Didn't you hear? He was picked up by a little barque, and has been a sort of knight-errant ever since. He had a shock, I think, that has made him unsociable and bearish. It was the death of a cousin, of whom he was fond."

"Was it Mrs. Vereker?" asked D'Albert, almost in a whisper; for he had caught sight of Max making his way from the other end of the balcony, looking handsomer than usual, with a radiance in his eyes that they had lacked for months.

Mrs. Adair saw him too, and forgot to answer.

"*Méchant!* always late," she murmured

reproachfully to Max, while her pretty white hand, resplendent with costly rings, lingered in his clasp.

And Max stood facing her, with an ardent expression on his features which was newly born.

Two figures in dominos and masks paused right under the balcony at the moment—the tall stooping figure of a man and the slight form of a young girl.

“There, Père Joseph, there!” she cried, in a voice shrill with pain, while she grasped the old man’s hand so hard that he flinched a little. “There she is—the wicked woman who wants to take my husband from me!”

“Hush, hush! they’ll hear you, *petite*. She is very beautiful. Ah, why does heaven give bad women such a face as that!” And Père Joseph crossed himself under the shelter of his domino, as though

the devil had looked at him through Mrs. Adair's odalisque eyes.

Max bent towards his fair companion, and Quita, marking his gesture, clutched at the priest's arm to save herself from falling, while she impetuously tried to unfasten her mask, gasping for air.

Père Joseph looked down at her pitifully, then almost dragged her away, fearful of a *scandale*.

"Did you see him, *mon oncle*?" she asked breathlessly, when they were a few paces off.

"Who?"

"*Him*—my husband! Did you see how she looked at him; how she grew as red as a rose at his approach; how her hand crept into his and lingered there? Oh Père Joseph, did you see it all?" she cried wildly. "And he—Max—returned her gaze!"

“Man is weak as a sapling, Pauvrette, when the devil tempts him in the form of a lovely woman—and she is lovely!—with her great eyes like stars, and her blood-red tresses that the old Venetian painters loved so well, and her skin of satin!” the priest muttered, angry with Max’s fair tempter, and yet half inclined to be caught himself by the glamour of that marvellous face. “Come home, little Quita, and we will find a plan for rescuing from the wolf the sheep that has gone astray. *Nil desperandum, mon enfant!* your husband will come back to you, if it is the will of heaven.”

“It will be too late—too late!” muttered Quita, with the blinding tears coursing one another down her cheeks, under her mask.

And Père Joseph, as he recollected the hectic bloom that stole so often to her thin cheek, and the short hacking cough that he

heard in the silent hours of the night, sighed—while his eyes grew very dim.

"I was just telling your friend Monsieur D'Albret some news I heard a few days ago," Mrs. Adair was saying meanwhile to Max; "guess what it is."

"I never trouble to guess at anything—not even a woman," Max answered with a smile.

"Perhaps a woman would not be able to keep up the character of a paradox to you," she said, in a low soft voice.

"*Cui bono* if she did? Life is fleeting, so let it be merry and pleasant, flavoured with heaps of smiles and love; and no enigmas and doubts to make our head or heart ache. Ah, *ma toute belle!* I should not like you half so well, if I had not learnt to read you like a book."

She flushed up hotly; and under her large carved sandalwood fan once more

stole her hand into Max's palm, while D'Albret, feeling himself unnoticed and *de trop*, sauntered to the far end of the balcony.

"Shall I tell you the news you heard?" Max asked.

"Yes."

"First of all, answer me one question truly. Did the news give you a thrill of—joy, Circe?"

He had not spoken her name for months and months, and she absolutely trembled all over with a sort of delirious pleasure at the sound.

"You know what the news was. You know that I am no longer free to love, without that love being a sin, Max; and yet you ask if I felt—*joy*! Oh Max Max! If you could but see into my heart! If you could read my soul, and know how each moment of my life is

filled by you, you would be sorry for me, even—even—if you cannot—*feel* with me !”

“Suppose I can feel with you?”

“What !”

She gazed at him with her whole soul in her glorious eyes, unconscious of, or else indifferent to, the fact that they two were not alone—that Spagnoletti and Di Rutiano and their clique were up in arms at her flagrant display of preference.

“Suppose that I have struggled to resist—and—cannot. Suppose that my love for you has become a wild maddening love, *plus fort que moi*,” Max whispered passionately. “And would it be strange if it were so? Could any man of mortal mould resist, with those eyes looking into his own, those lips telling him what he hardly dares believe? I am free, Circe, if you are not. Ask your own heart whether,

in spite of the waves having given up their prey, *we two may not be happy yet.*"

She stared at him, incredulous, doubting, while the mass of her adorers seemed to rise up before her in a dark mass, and then fade out of view. Could it be true?—ah, could it be true that she had won him at last?

"Tout vient d qui sait attendre."

It was a maxim she had believed in always, and now it was verified.

Her features waxed radiant with triumph and pleasure, for in the dark-blue eyes of him she adored she believed an infinity of passion shone, and she gave him back glance for glance, the warmth and glow of hers rivalling his own.

"La beauté sans vertu est une fleur sans parfum," thought Max; but he kept his thoughts to himself, and only murmured tenderly:

"Don't you feel that you have conquered, Circe? Are you glad?"

"Glad! Glad! Say, does happiness ever kill, Max?"

"Grief doesn't," he answered shortly; then he pressed the white fingers he held, "or I should have died when you left me for Erroll Adair—*curse him!*"

The two last words he muttered through his set teeth as he turned away.

"I'll make that beautiful flirt draggle his name through the mire, as he did mine. Mrs. Adair's husband shall rue the day he first set eyes on my face."

This had been his one thought since the hour he had been told of Erroll's rescue from a watery grave.



CHAPTER VI.

THE FABLED BUTTERFLY.

"I have seen thee in my dreaming,
I have thought of thee by day,
And an eye on me is beaming
In the distance far away.

The cloud that floats above me
Takes the likeness of thy form.
Oh! say if thou lovest me
In a realm that knows not storm."

CARNIVAL week had brought a crowd of fashionables to Rome; and amongst them was Lady Walgrave. Perhaps her movements had been actuated by a little curiosity as to the progression of her friend Mrs. Adair's *affaire du cœur*.

The words, "*Chère amie*, while there's life there's hope!" had often recurred to her; and not holding a very exalted opinion of Mrs. Adair, she rather desired to watch over Max's interests, having taken a fancy to him in a genuine maternal sort of fashion. An *habituée* of continental cities, such things did not shock her nerves as they would have a strict British matron perhaps.

She found her friend Max strangely altered in the few months that had elapsed since they had met last in Paris. He had apparently become heartless and reckless, and living for the hour. He had also grown into a "lion," and submitted willingly to his post. He went everywhere; no portrait was perfect unless he had painted it; no salon was a success unless he adorned it; and yet he really walked through it all like a soul in transmigration, yearning after the only thing that could bear it back to

heaven. His abstraction was set down to a captivating dreaminess, his fits of moodiness and reserve to intellectual eccentricity, his cynicism to a profound knowledge of and contempt for human nature. Fashion, in fact, had taken him by the hand; his face and figure were lauded, his manner copied, his worst pen-and-ink sketches bought at fabulous prices, and the stain on his name forgotten. And yet Max Vereker was ungrateful and unappreciative of society's goodness, and *au fond* an unhappy man.

"Come here, monsieur!" cried Lady Walgrave, as he sauntered—it must be confessed listlessly—into the luxurious and gilded apartment, the rental of which for the season exceeded his yearly income.

"Come and answer for your sins. Circe has been complaining that she never sees your face anywhere now."

"Not guilty! Lady Walgrave. Several

days have I been out, but Mrs. Adair has never deigned to honour me by a sight of her. How could she, when she has been doing cicerone to my friend D'Albret, and turning his head?"

"You hear what he says, Circe?"

"I hear," she answered indifferently, though a storm raged in her heart; for Max had never been near her for days after the warm little episode of the balcony; and she had neither eaten nor drank nor slept, in her restlessness and perplexity and wounded pride; "and if I spoke of Mr. Vereker's absence it was purely for a desire to make conversation. Seeing the same people day after day is of all things what I most detest."

"You are ungracious, *ma chère*. I wonder Mr. Vereker, knowing how many fair ladies would be charmed to talk to him, does not throw up the task of cultivating your friendship."

"Society would never forgive me if I did," Max said, throwing himself into a corner of the tête-à-tête occupied by Mrs. Adair; and taking out his pocket-book, he began quietly sketching the poodle who slumbered soundly in her fair owner's arms.

"Why don't you say something, Mr. Vereker?" asked Lady Walgrave pettishly. She loved to be amused by the little *can-caneries* around, and Max usually succeeded in amusing her, but this day he was evidently *distract* and silent.

"I am trying to portray Cara's beauties; and in her present attitude the task is so fascinating that it engrosses me entirely," he said significantly. "What colour are Cara's eyes when they are open?"

Mrs. Adair shook her head—and leaning over he fell to examining for himself. His breath swept over her cheek, and his fair

hair almost mingled with her own warm tresses ; and flushing hotly she turned away, afraid of Lady Walgrave's quick eyes.

"Cara, you tire me!" she cried crossly, putting the dog down not too gently. She was of a hard and unforgiving nature, and she still chafed under the memory of Max's unexplained absence of late. "Mr. Vereker has finished your portrait, though I am neglected, and I hate playing second fiddle, even to a dog."

"I am in the black-books to-day, I see," Max said coldly ; "and as my room may be more acceptable than my company, I had better be off."

He rose, but catching his hand surreptitiously she drew him down again to his seat.

"How silent you both are to-day," broke in the hostess, from her easy-chair, where she reclined, fanning herself lazily with

peacocks' feathers; "one would think you were two dummies."

Still neither answered her; but Max riveted his handsome speaking eyes on the beautiful alluring face beside him; and in that look who would have read insincerity and a desire for revenge?

"What ails Circe to-day, Mr. Vereker; she has scarcely opened her mouth? I declare English women bring English ways everywhere. They are either dull or sentimental."

"Don't accuse me of the last," cried Mrs. Adair, rousing herself. "Sentiment always appears to me both mawkish and imbecile."

"Women nowadays are very difficult beings to converse with," Max observed, laughing. "They are either yea-nay, and quite too impossible, or else they are fast. Commend me to the yea-nay ones. A

man must have heaps of tact to know how to tackle the advanced school. Tell me, Lady Walgrave, did you ever, in your varied experience, meet a woman who was not a riddle or a sphinx, and wanted a lot of trouble to unravel?"

"Well, yes; *par exemple*, I am not a sphinx. Life is too short to be a sham. I prefer to be honest and plainspoken; and if I make a good enemy, I also make a sincere friend."

"You are one in ten thousand," cried Max warmly—and he meant it too. "But the exception makes the rule, you know. Mrs. Adair, for instance, who can understand her?—kind to-day and coy to-morrow, and to one thing constant never."

"Eternal sugar and sunshine cloy; though fickleness is often trying too," Mrs. Adair remarked pointedly.

"Could anyone be fickle to you, *ma*

belle?” asked Max, *sotto voce*. Then he went on aloud: “You look ennuyed, Lady Walgrave; let us have a game of *écarté* together.”

“Not with me; I am too warm. Perhaps Circe will play.”

“You advised me once not to play at any game with Mrs. Adair; but I like daring all. So, madame, *commencons!*” and he brought a pack of cards.

“I haven’t an idea of the game.”

“Lady Walgrave, will you teach her?”

“Yes, if you like.”

“And look over her?”

“Yes. She is not to be trusted!”

“I shouldn’t care what Mrs. Adair was, so long as she liked me a little—as she likes Cara there, for instance. Can anyone imagine a more heavenly existence than that little brute’s? Kissed and caressed by a pair of scarlet lips, over which men go

mad—fondled in her slumbers by the fairest of arms !”

There was an awkward silence, which Max broke himself by a little laugh.

“But we are forgetting *écarté* all the time.”

And in the game he found an opportunity of pressing for another meeting with her.

“Shall it be soon, *ma belle* ?” he pleaded, as earnestly as if all the sweetness of his life depended on it.

“Yes,” Mrs. Adair whispered back.

The subtle perfume of her hair went out to him. The lips and arms he had eulogised were so near—yet he never lost his head. All these charms never moved him a whit to love or passion. Still, as Lady Walgrave turned away for a book, he bent quickly and pressed a kiss on the fingers near him.

“What a charming man he is, Circe!” Lady Walgrave said, when he had left them. “And as handsome as an Apollo. Those fair-haired blue-eyed men have infinitely more success with us women than the bold black-orbed brigand style. I detest dark men. They are usually such bad form too, with none of the thoroughbred languor and *insouciance* of Saxon beauty. No one will ever persuade me that there is a real flaw in Max Vereker’s birth; he looks every inch an aristocrat. And I feel certain that brother of his is an unscrupulous and unprincipled fellow. But tell me, is Max Vereker’s wife really drowned?—and what was the cause of the quarrel between her and him?”

“Erroll,” answered Mrs. Adair shortly.

“Erroll! Was she in love with him?”

“Over head and ears, from her babyhood.”

"And why didn't he marry her?"

"Because *this* came between," she laughed, pointing to her own face.

"Beauty is only skin deep," remarked Lady Walgrave, philosophising. "That little girl would have probably loved him and made him far happier than you do."

"Not only probably, but assuredly she would have done so," was the reply, in a hard voice.

"Then, knowing that, why did you step in between them?"

"Why? because I had a fancy for Queenscourt and all the loaves and fishes, added to a nice little sum at Coutts'; and, besides, I wanted a home."

"So you got one by quietly stepping over a human heart—eh Circe?" asked the other, who occasionally went in for tragedy.

"Exactly; but I wouldn't have minded

the husband thrown in with the rest of the goods and chattels, provided I had not again met——”

“Max Vereker. I see! Well, I don’t wonder at your infatuation. Though it is wrong—decidedly wrong. The only thing is, that the man has not a spark of real feeling in his composition, and is totally incapable of making love save in badinage.”

And with this little fling Lady Walgrave took up her book again.

“No real feeling, and only makes love in badinage,” repeated Mrs. Adair mentally, a frown puckering her fair forehead. “I wonder if it is so. If I believed he was playing with me, I would revenge myself upon him somehow. I would run away with Quentin Vereker even. Erroll would be sure to divorce me, and I should reign over that old abbey, each stick and stone of which

Max loves with all his heart. *That* would be rare vengeance, I know !”

When the morrow came—a lovely day, with one of Italia’s serene blue skies and a brilliant sunshine touching everything with a rich and mellow splendour—Mrs. Adair walked into Max’s rooms, accompanied, for the sake of *les convenances*, by her French maid. Her heart misgave her as she entered, and Lady Walgrave’s words returned in full force ; for Max was so cool and unembarrassed in his manner that she could hardly bring herself to believe he was the same man who had whispered words of passion into her willing ear, and kissed her hands ardently but the day before.

The fact was, that a variableness in demeanour was part of his game ; believing that naught so much as alternate hope and doubt won a woman’s heart completely.

“ I am at your service, madame,” he said

formally, beginning to arrange his canvas and easel for a likeness of her he had commenced.

She looked at him wistfully for a moment, then went up to his side on pretence of examining the sketch.

"Max, for the love of Heaven, don't speak formally like that; I cannot bear it!" she faltered.

He glanced significantly at the maid Georgette, whose black eyes were apparently fixed on a book she had brought with her at her mistress's suggestion; whilst in reality, with French curiosity, she was watching what she considered a *grande passion* in high life.

"I have a novel idea in my head, Mrs. Adair," he said aloud; "I propose painting a whole gallery of my friends, in curious guises."

"And what am I to be?—a bird of

paradise, as your friend D'Albret calls me?" she asked lightly, but chafing in her soul at his indifference and coldness.

He stooped towards her on pretence of searching for his palette.

"You," he said in Italian, "you shall be the fabled Butterfly, that will bring me joy and love on your glittering wings! You will never fly away, carissima, and leave me to pine alone; but, nestling in my heart, let us live and die together!"

She turned red, then pale.

"He is totally devoid of love-making, save in badinage," Lady Walgrave had said; and was she right in her judgment? And yet, in jest or earnest, how well his voice suited love! how well his eyes looked it!

"If your words were not the words of mockery, Max!"

"Mockery! why mockery? Is it strange if a beautiful woman—a woman with such a

face as yours, Circe, bewitches a man against his better judgment, or against his very will, so that he forgets all but her?—the horrible distance that divides them socially; the worldliness and prudence that gave her to another man's arms; the miserable knowledge that in loving him she must yield up the fairest and brightest dreams of wealth and luxury, and even *name*; that he must drag her down with him in his ill fortune; draw a fatal ban upon her life? But is not love, *such love as you and I could feel*, worth all this, and more?"

And as he asked the questions, under the cover of his fair moustache, he sneered at his own rhapsody.

So much did his heart war against this woman, whose words had first poisoned him against his wife, that, desirous as he was to humble her, to crush her in the

dust, and revenge himself on Erroll, he yet could not restrain at times an outward and visible sign of the repulsion that lived in his soul.

Fortunately for him, the woman's supreme conceit never allowed her to see through the flimsy veil of sentiment; and if an inadvertent word escaped his lips she put it down to a natural sarcasm of character, that made his moments of softness doubly dangerous and fascinating.

"Will you go to the ball to-night?" she asked.

"What ball?"

"The Carnival Ball."

"Are you going?"

"Yes. Lady Walgrave suggested it. She nor I have ever been to a thing of the sort, and as we are going in a party there will be no harm. You will go with us?" she said anxiously.

"Not with you, for D'Albret and I have promised to dine at the Caffé di Roma with Prince Spagnoletti, but I will try and go later. How shall I discover you?"

She thought a moment.

"I should know you anywhere and in any disguise—my instinct would tell me," she murmured; "but to make sure of your finding me I will wear a red rose on my breast."

"The sign of a bleeding heart, *m'amie*. And when I have found you, you will give that rose to me, so that I may keep and treasure it for ever and ever."

Mocking words earnestly spoken; and she went away from the house with his voice ringing in her ear and her heart beating fast.

Surely the man loved her!

Left alone, Max turned Mrs. Adair's

portrait to the wall impatiently, and bolted the door of the studio ; then he drew the heavy crimson velvet curtains over the windows to exclude the day, and lit several tapers.

These tasks accomplished, he went to a large locked portfolio, and carefully, almost tenderly, took out a painting, which he placed on his easel.

The waxlight quivered softly on the clear transparent tints—tints so exquisite that only a born artist could have felt and perpetuated them.

It was a painting of the sea—"the blue, the fresh, the ever free;" the type of the Infinite.

There was no shore, there were no rocks, not even a suggestion of distant land. But the sea itself was such a sea that it was simply a marvel how a tyro's hand could have painted its divine and eternal

and most perfect loveliness. A huge sapphire waveless ocean was spread out in a lustrous calm, beneath a sky that seemed like a dream of heaven, stretching away, as if in infinite distance, and melting at the horizon into the translucent purple of the great vault of ether, until it was quite impossible to tell where the water ended or the sky began.

In all the wide wide world of space one object alone was visible. A single shattered spar, to which was lashed the slender fragile figure of a woman, with a pure white motionless face upturned towards that distant serene heaven, whence comes sometimes a grand hope and sometimes a great despair.

The cruel sea had done its work. No single gleam of life would ever come again to those sweet sculptured features. Nor would any loving sorrowing hand ever lay

that fair slight form away under the emerald turf and blooming flowers.

What the mighty sea possessed the sea would keep. The placid waters seemed to toy idly with the polished marble-like limbs and the long floating chestnut hair, as if quietly exulting in their power, and gilding with a bright and treacherous smile the woful destruction which they had worked.

Max was down on his knees before the picture.

"Night and day—night and day," he muttered, with livid lips, "have I passed to complete my picture—my dream—for I dreamed that I saw her thus—thus! It is her face—her form. Nothing is wanting save life. Oh God, if I were a second Prometheus—if one spark of life could make this move or speak!"

"Speak! If she *could*, she would turn

away in love for *him*, in hate for *me*. It is better she is dead—that she is no more a living lie! I feel her soft arms now around my neck; her red lips press my own; her voice is on my ear; her heart!—her heart was false—false to heaven—false as hell! Yet I love her—love her *so*, that so long as I live no woman can come between her and me. Fool that I am! I am not fit to be alone with this!”

Seizing the painting, he put it back into the portfolio, then he blew out the tapers and pulled the velvet curtains aside; and going up to a buffet, drained a small glass of brandy to the dregs.

An hour later he ran down the stairs from his dressing-room, whistling

Il balen del Suo Sorrisso—

and went on his way to meet Prince Spagnoletti and D'Albret, as appointed, at the Caffé di Roma.



CHAPTER VII.

THE CARNIVAL BALL.

"Didst thou but know, as I do,
The pangs and tortures of a slighted love,
Thou wouldst not wonder at the sudden change;
For, when ill-treated, it all turns to hate,
And the true darling of our soul's revenge."

"PÈRE JOSEPH."

"Mon enfant."

"I want to go out this evening."

"To chapel?"

"To a ball."

"A ball!"

The poor old priest stared at her in profound amazement. A fit subject she was for a ball!

She lay back in an easy-chair, her always slight figure now worn to a shadow; her face purer, whiter, more than ever like a lily, and so small that the big brown eyes, encircled by deep dark shades, looked too large for it.

Two vivid crimson spots burned on her cheeks, and her marvellous hair fell still lustrous, but neglected, over her shoulders, adding to her air of fragility. A loose wrapper hung in folds round her, and her slender fingers clasped nervously on her knees.

“A ball, Quita?” he repeated.

“Yes, Père Joseph—a bal masqué. Everyone in Rome is going to it; and I must go too,” she answered quietly but positively.

“It is an ungodly place, a bal masqué; a sink of iniquity, with roaring lions and ravening wolves, and no white-souled

woman should go there. Think of your precious soul, *mon enfant*. Would you risk its salvation for the follies of this wicked world ; for the devil and all his works ? ”

“ I would risk anything to save *him* from *her* ! ” she murmured, in a low faint voice, while a few rebellious tears trickled down her wan cheeks in sheer weariness and dreariness of spirit. Then she roused herself, and, rising languidly, she went over to where her uncle sat.

Kneeling down by his chair she looked up wistfully in his face.

“ You won’t say no, Père Joseph. *He* is sure to be there, and I might get speech with him you know.”

“ Ah *petite*, lay not up for yourself treasure on earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break in and steal.”

“ She is a thief that has stolen my hus-

band's heart away from me!" flashed Quita quickly.

"And do you ever think, Pauvrette, that her power, evil though she be, may be greater than your power? It is not always the good who triumph."

"I know; but I cannot believe that right will not right itself—that wickedness must flourish for ever. Max believes me dead. If he knew I lived, his love might come back to me."

Père Joseph shook his head.

"Delilah has him in her toils, and such is the folly of man that he would sooner be bound in chains of passion than wander in freedom by an angel's side."

"She said once in my hearing, 'Whilst there's life there's hope.' Why may I not say the same?"

"True; but a man bewitched is like a reed; the spell of the sorceress can bind

and break him at her will, and *that* woman is a sorceress, little Quita."

"She is Jael! She is a woman who would tear out a man's heart string by string while she kissed his lips. She is a woman that would in cold blood murder the man slumbering in her arms," cried Quita passionately.

"And you must go to this ball?"

"Yes, *mon oncle*, they are sure to be there, and I shall know better by hearing them speak together whether Max will ever come back to me. I am sick of eating my heart out in uncertainty and doubt; it will kill me."

"But if they see you there will be a scandal, and I shall not be there to protect you."

"I shall wear a mask and domino, and no one will notice me. He does not even know that the sea has given up its prey,

and will never dream that it is his wife who hearkens to his love-words with a wanton."

The two crimson spots on her cheeks burnt brighter, and a sharp fit of coughing ensued, that shook her slight figure, and impeded articulation for a while.

Père Joseph shook his head gravely and sorrowfully.

"The night air will give you your death, Pauvrette."

"What avails it to live?" she asked wistfully.

"If you don't take care of yourself, you will leave him to that woman," he answered, with profound jesuitical reasoning. "Cannot you wean your heart from earth and earth's sons, *mon enfant*? Life is fleeting; and if forgetting the world, and its follies and crimes, you could devote yourself to heaven, you would find peace and rest for evermore."

“No!” she said. “Whilst I live, I shall have no peace or rest till Max takes me in his arms again, and confesses he wronged me! It may not be yet—it may not be for years! but I pray God, night and day, that it may be before I die!”

“Years are not for you, poor soul,” he thought, as he regarded her earnestly. The hollow eyes, the vivid patch of hectic, the prostration of her frame, all told their tale but too plainly.

“I dare not go with you. Heaven forbids it; but, my heart will be with you, and my prayers, little Quita.”

She drew a chair and sat down beside him, and laid her weary head upon his shoulder; and he passed his hand gently and caressingly over her tangled chestnut locks.

“It almost seems as if you were a little child again, and we were back in

Jamaica," he murmured. "Do you remember at all, Quita?"

"I remember! I remember that maman died of a broken heart because she was left alone. Will my fate be like hers, think you?"

Always Max now—she thought of nothing but Max. Somehow Erroll had seemed to go right out of her life in that awful moment when she was face to face with death.

Max was the Alpha and the Omega of her life; but though she yearned for him with her inmost soul, she had never spoken to him when he had even brushed by her in the street. His gay bearing, his reckless smiles, his apparent oblivion of the past, made her heart fail and her spirit sink. And she had always shrunk away from courting his notice, as though she had been really the vile guilty thing he deemed her.

"You will go out now and get me the mask and domino, Père Joseph," she said.

It was Carnival time—a time when all the world of Rome went mad. So, hoping to escape unnoticed in the crowd, he rose meekly to do her bidding; and as he came back with the mask and domino he crossed himself.

"The *bon Dieu* pardon me!" he muttered, "for letting her wear the livery of the devil. But it is in a good cause, a righteous cause!"

An hour later, Quita came down from her room fully equipped for the ball.

"Give me your blessing, *mon oncle*, before I go," she said. And bending over the little fragile figure wrapped in her black domino, Père Joseph blessed her. The tears were in his eyes when she turned away.

"Zoë did not die of a broken heart, but of consumption, and consumption is

hereditary," he murmured sorrowfully.
"The child is dying fast!"

In a *loge au premier* Lady Walgrave's party were seated; the ladies *en cachette*, their escort unmasked.

The occupants of the box were evidently both amused and excited, for a *bal masqué* was a novel sight to English eyes, and savoured so much of mystery and intrigue that it had quite a pleasant little flavour of forbidden fruit about it.

It was quite late—close upon midnight—when Max and D'Albret sauntered in, and, after a minute or two, leaving his companion to make his way to Lady Walgrave's party, Max stood by the door alone, conspicuous by his fair and handsome face and thoroughbred air.

"Shall I tell you your fortune, monsieur?" asked a low voice in French; and looking

down he saw a slight girlish figure in a black domino by his side. Of the face, the mask only revealed a pair of very large mournful eyes, that regarded him steadfastly, raising his curiosity by their expression.

“As you will, my little *intriguante*,” he answered lightly, with a bright and careless smile, and a look in his eyes which he often wore in the society of women. “I will escort you to a quieter spot, where you can discourse and enchant mine ear.”

The figure shrank back a little.

Alas! Max had not been wont to smile and speak like that to strange women! and the change struck like a sharp knife; but after an instant she put a trembling hand on his arm, and he led her away to a vestibule which ran out of the ball-room, but was less crowded.

“Now then, mademoiselle, begin. I am

all impatient to hear the words of wisdom from those sweet lips. Would that I could watch them fall ! ”

She did not answer, but her heart fluttered like a bird's. His levity shocked her ; and she almost wished she had minded Père Joseph's words, and kept from the ungodly place.

“ You are frightened, my child,” he said kindly, feeling her fingers tremble on his arm. “ Do not fear, you are quite safe with me—say, have we two ever met before ? ”

“ Yes ; but we are strangers to one another,” she faltered, in a tone that was barely audible.

“ Then, how on earth can you tell me my fortune ? ”

No answer.

Max laughed, it was evidently a school-girl airing her wings in a surreptitious

flight, a bread-and-butter miss who had escaped from the vigilance of her *pension*, and failed in her first effort at intriguing.

"Shall I tell you first of your past?" she asked, after a short silence.

"My *past*!" and Max shivered a little. "No, I think you had better leave that alone! *Ma foi, petite*, that past of mine has been such a fiery ordeal, that your crude experience could not even guess at its tortures."

"I think I can."

"You think you can!" he repeated after her, mockingly. "Who are you, I wonder; a little Solon in petticoats, so young and so wise? I don't believe you are French, and I don't think we two are strangers. Do you know, something tells me that we have known each other well?"

"Does it?"

The two words fell with such softness

and wistfulness, that Max was fain forced to admit he was fairly intrigued.

When had he heard that voice? It seemed like the echo of a far-off dream. It brought back the memory of the past, although its tones were evidently altered for the purpose of disguise.

“There are two seats; shall we take advantage of them, or shall I escort you to that *loge au premier* where the English party are seated? Perhaps you belong to them?”

“No, no! I know nothing of them. Who are they?”

“I shall be telling tales out of school if I indulge your curiosity, as the ladies are *en cachette*. However, there won't be much damage done by my indiscretion. The one on the right is my dear friend, Lady Walgrave, one of the best and kindest of women; next to her is a millionaire, and

a boon companion, Prince Spagnoletti; then comes D'Albret, a Bohemian, whose *beaux yeux* have enormous success with your fair sex; then—but I shall only tire you, as you don't know them, it can't be interesting."

"Yes it is. And who is that lady on the left, the one wearing a red rose?"

"Oh, she—she is another friend of mine."

"A very dear friend?"

In spite of himself, Max coloured deeply; and at sight of it, the heart of his questioner sank.

"A *very* dear friend!" he replied, in mockery, but Quita did not see the mocking light in his eyes, or the curl on his lip.

"Ah, and she is very beautiful!"

The words were so regretfully spoken that Max wondered.

"Eve was curious, but her daughter said her hollow! Yes, my little incognita is very beautiful, as beautiful as a *sultana* Houri—but why do you ask?"

"I wanted to know what you thought of her," she said, with a piteous quiver of her mouth.

"But why? Tell me, am I foolish enough to have created an interest in you?"

"I take more interest in you than in anyone in the wide wide world!"

Max gazed at her amazed.

"By Jove! *a bonne fortune*—a great acquisition! I am very grateful, mademoiselle, for your goodness."

"Oh no, you are not?"

Something, he knew not what, drew him towards the girl; a curious indefinable attraction which he had never felt before, and that was on the

spring morning when he had first met Quita in the Queenscourt meadow.

"Tell me, I pray of you, who you are? Confide in my honour, I have never broken faith with anyone in my life!"

The faintest sigh escaped her.

"Don't you believe me?"

"No!"

"But why?"

"Because your past is known to me. Say, could you *swear* that you have never broken faith and thrown away in scorn and contempt a heart that loved you? Have you kept religiously the vows you breathed at the altar? Has doubt and jealousy ever warped your judgment and left you remorseful and unhappy?"

The words, true as they were, did not surprise him, or awaken the slightest suspicion of the speaker. They were words, he thought, which were the mere hackneyed

jargon of playing at gipsies, and they touched him no more than the wind.

"You speak like a book, my child. I may or may not have been guilty of all those heinous sins, but my conscience is clear to a certain extent. For unlimited truth and love, I found deceit and falsity; from an unbounded faith in woman, I awakened to believing all the world a living lie. But this is strange conversation for a *bal masqué*. Have you been very often to such places, mademoiselle?"

"Heaven forbid! It is my very first visit, and it will be my last." And as she spoke a low hacking cough broke from her.

"You suffer," cried Max gently; "a powerful motive must have induced you to come when you are ill."

"A motive for which I *lived*! But I cannot see clearly; all seems mist and

perplexity yet," she murmured to herself. But he heard her.

"Let me try and disperse the mist and remove the perplexity, if I can," and his voice grew unconsciously tender.

"Only *you* could do it."

"Tell me a little of yourself. Do not part leaving me in mystery. Lift your mask a moment."

"Not for worlds," she faltered.

"Why not? I will not take advantage. I am not merciless."

"I know you are not unmerciful, except to yourself."

"Whisper your name, and I'll swear I'll keep it secret. Only your christian name?" he asked, a thrill he could not understand passing over him as he clasped her hand.

She let her hand remain in his, but answered:

"I cannot tell you ; at least, not yet."

"When will you tell me?"

"When you have answered a question satisfactorily," she said earnestly.

"And that question is——"

"*Do you love Mrs. Adair?*"

He started perceptibly.

Two eyes—large, dark, and in terrible earnest—looked right into his ; but beside them, and just a gleam of pearly teeth through the heavy lace that fell from the mask, there was nothing to suggest to him who she was.

Two hands he had imprisoned fluttered like young birds in his grasp, and grew as cold as ice in his warm palm. Suddenly an idea struck him, and he averted his head to smile.

It was Georgette, of course — Mrs. Adair's French maid. She had eyes—dark as sloes—only they had not always

worn that expression. She had been commissioned by her mistress to intrigue him, and he determined to play into her hands and his own at the same time.

"Do I love Mrs. Adair? You are very young, and very unworldly, mademoiselle, or you would have learnt by this time that men don't usually wear their hearts on their sleeve for daws to peck at. Love is too sacred a thing to flaunt before vulgar eyes—at least—so it seems to me."

"Is your love for her then so great—*so great*—that you dare not speak of it? Has that love made you forget anyone you may have loved before?"

Unconsciously she pressed his hand and gazed imploringly up in his face. At that moment it seemed to her as if her fiat of life or death was on the point of being spoken.

"She is a capital actress," he thought.

“I haven’t an idea who you are, *petite*; but when a man feels much it is always a relief to confide his feelings to another ear. Somehow you have inspired me with confidence. Yes, she of whom you have spoken could make one forget all but herself. Is it marvellous if it were so? Could one look in her face and remember aught beside? Could one touch her lips, and in such a heaven recollect what may have passed on earth? Is she not beautiful enough to drive a man mad—to make him feel that life *with* her would be a paradise—*without* her a desert?”

“Ah!”

It was a mercy to him that that mask hid the torture on the face—the pallor on the trembling lips.

“And now I have answered your question fully, tell me your name!”

At this moment the occupants of the

loge au premier swooped down upon them, but Max was so engrossed in his companion, that he did not see them.

Quita did, however.

"Max, why have you not come near me to-night? You will drive me mad!" whispered Mrs. Adair, unfastening the red rose and giving it to him.

And Quita heard and saw.

Max took the flower mechanically.

"In one moment. Tell me your name," he reiterated, stooping over Quita.

"Not now, not yet," she answered, with a great ring of pain running through her voice. "You shall know some day, but *it will be too late.*" And she was lost to him in the mad whirling crowd.

He went dreamily to his party.

"Who was that, Vereker?"

"I haven't an idea. Someone who

knows a good deal about me. A *soubrette*, perhaps, who has picked up the information from her betters," and he looked keenly at Mrs. Adair, but from the expression of her eyes he saw at once that she was innocent.

"I wonder who she was," he said, after a moment or two.

"Leave off puzzling about her, Mr. Vereker," flushed Mrs. Adair angrily. "I should really have thought you were too sensible to be scared by an *intriguante* at a *bal masqué*."

"You had better take Circe for a turn round the room, Mr. Vereker, before we go; she is anxious to see the decorations," Lady Walgrave said, as she and D'Albret moved off.

In obedience Max proffered his arm, but his eyes roved round and round in search of the little domino.

"You are really quite *épris*, Max," Mrs. Adair remarked pettishly. "She might have been as ugly as Medusa under her mask."

"Or as lovely as—you are," he answered; and again, in spite of himself, he began thinking of the incognita, and forgot to talk.

"I declare you are quite preoccupied," cried his companion; "it is a case of love at first sight."

"Not at sight, since I did not see her," he said, with a forced smile; "but I confess she has left an impression on me."

"Max, how dare you say such a thing to me! You are cruel, unmanly!"

"What did I say? that she had left an impression on me? So she did, by her words."

"What did she talk about?"

"*You!* Is it a wonder that the theme impressed me?" he asked.

"Don't try to deceive me, I have never seen your face wear such a weary listless look as it does to-night; I don't seem able to arouse the smallest attention;" and her voice was a strange mixture of wistfulness and wrath.

"I am tired, *ma belle*."

"Of me?"

"Of this festive scene. I should like solitude, if I could get it."

"Byron's solitude?" she sneered.

"Ah, I remember: 'With some sweet spirit for my minister.' If that was so, where could I find a fairer sweeter spirit than the one beside me?" and he pressed her arm to him.

That pressure sent a hot crimson tide over her face under the shelter of her mask.

"I wonder where all this crowd came from and where they go," she remarked

carelessly, hoping to wound him by apparent indifference.

“To some excellent restaurant for supper,” he replied, laughing; “some of them to regret perhaps, and some to rejoice. What will your feelings be?”

“To rejoice,” she said.

“Why?”

“Why?—because I feel gay—I suppose!”

“No, that is not the reason. Shall I tell you why you rejoice?”

Her pulse throbbed fast at the *empressment* of his voice and manner; in another moment she forgot all her anger and her assumed coldness.

“Yes, tell me, for I should like to know. I feel like one in a dream—a dream of heaven, Max. How shall I wake?”

And she drew close to him, the influence of the hour and of his proximity was upon her.

"Your dream will be unlike many—a realised one. You rejoice, Circe, because one you love is near you!"

"If he but loved me as I love him!" she flashed impetuously. "Oh Max—Max! if you knew how you were thought of in absence, worshipped in presence, you would give back love for love!"

"How do you know I do not?" he asked softly. "Have my eyes belied the burning words that have hovered on my lips and been thrust back oft unspoken?" and he fixed his eyes long and earnestly on her.

"I think sometimes that no one will chase away the memory of your wife, Max!" she said, in a low voice.

He started as if a serpent had stung him. How dared this woman, who had thrown the first stone, allude to her?

Past all dishonour,
Death has left on her
Only the beautiful!

"Don't speak of *her*," he said, and his tones were cold and stern. "The past is dead, but the present lives—bright and glowing—lives for *us*, Circe. Don't shadow it by calling up the memory of evil days. Let us think only of *ourselves*."

"I thought you were a sceptic in love, Max?"

"I was."

"Were—and you are not now?"

He was silent.

"If you have faith in love now, on what is it grounded?" she asked softly.

"On the dream of the last two months," he said. "May I call to-morrow? I may, your eyes say yes."

"Suppose my lips say no?"

"I will only mind what I read in your eyes; let them always answer me, Circe. Not your lips, sweet and lovely as they are! Words may be false, tears but recorded

untruths; but eyes are the windows of the soul. Look at me !”

She obeyed him, and her heart, with all its wild passion was turned upon him in that glance. Max drew a deep breath. The game worked well. This woman, at a word from him, would be ready to draggle her husband's honour and name through the mud.

“Look at me again like that, when we two are quite alone,” he whispered.

A little sob sounded at the moment near them. Max turned quickly. They had been standing against the door of an empty *loge*, and in the shadow of it stood a black domino.

“Do not cry, signorina, he may come yet,” he whispered to the domino with a merry laugh.

“*Never!*” was the quiet reply; and she moved away.

"It looks like my little incognita!" he exclaimed.

"Oh no, there are hundreds of black dominos; but the one who spoke to you had, I saw, a wedding-ring on her finger."

It was an untruth, for Quita had been gloved; but she did not care for Max to speak to any woman but herself; still, her random words set him thinking.

"A wedding-ring, then it could not have been Georgette after all; I would give the world to find out who she was."

"*À demain*, Max!"

"*À demain*!" and he clasped her fingers fervently, while his thoughts were far from her.





CHAPTER VIII.

“WHEN YOU BID ME I WILL COME.”

“How, in the soul’s dark hour, Love’s
Temple-veil is rent in twain,
And the heart quivers, thorn-crowned, on
The cross of fiery pain !
It tells of golden moments lost, heart
Seared, blind passion’s thrall,
Life’s spring-tide blossoms run to waste,
Love’s honey turned to gall !”

THE mystic words, *d demain*, had been uttered in vain. Max did not keep the appointment he had made, for somehow a strange repulsion had sprung up in his heart, almost as quickly as a gourd in the

night—for the Professional Beauty—and he could not shake it off.

Curiously enough, the less he thought of her the more the memory of his little incognita haunted him. Her slender figure, her low voice, her large pathetic eyes—each and all came back to him again and again, like a lost chord in memory, a vague link with his old life, a half-uttered sound of familiar music, a waft across the desert that divided his past from his present. His nerves were shaken, and fancies thronged thick and fast of what he knew savoured of the impossible, so that he could neither eat, nor drink, nor sleep. A vague restlessness of spirit that was like a consuming fever was upon him, that no mortal could allay or human skill administer to. What it wanted was a "touch of a vanished hand, the sound of a voice that was still."

Further and further each hour he drifted from what had been his everyday life in the glorious old Roman city. Drifted from his intimate associates, from his normal amusements and occupations, and dropped into that state of "the world forgetting and by the world forgot." And Victor D'Albret was the only man he saw, simply because D'Albret would take no denial.

They were sitting *tête-à-tête*, smoking. Max had been unusually gloomy and *distracted* all the morning, and D'Albret had signally failed in starting any theme to arouse him, when suddenly he uttered words that came like a thunder-clap.

"Have you any relatives of your name alive, Max?"

Max started, and turned ghastly pale.

But he was too much a man of the world not to keep himself well in hand on most occasions, so the next instant he

went on quietly puffing at his cigar, and answered carelessly :

"Yes, a brother."

"A brother, Max ! How is it that you never told me about him ?"

"Because I had nothing to tell—good."

"Are you not friends with him ?"

Max turned upon him at this question, with white face and flashing eyes, like a stag at bay.

"*Friends !*" he almost hissed out.

"Quentin Vereker and I—friends !"

"But why not ? What can your brother have done for you to speak like that ?" asked D'Albret, in surprise.

"What has he done ? Don't you remember I told you long ago that the biggest scoundrel living had done me an irreparable injury ? Well, then, that scoundrel is my brother, Quentin Vereker. Though the same blood runs in our veins,

he and I are mortal enemies. Don't you know, man, that he stole my birthright from me—that he did even worse—to gain property and fortune he traduced the fair fame of my dead mother. *Curse him!* I am not an evil or a vengeful man, D'Albret—you have known me long enough and well enough to have found that out—but I swear that I can never look on my brother's face without—*murder* in my soul!”

“I recollect now—I have heard the story of the wrong he did you; and don't wonder at your feelings, Max! I believe *I* should have killed him already, if I had been in your place. I was a dolt to mention the fellow to you!”

“Why did you mention him?”

“Because I happened to see him yesterday.”

“Saw him yesterday! Where?”

“At Mrs. Adair's.”

Max was silent for a moment—then he asked very quietly. "And did she seem to appreciate his society?"

D'Albret smiled with a leaven of bitterness. He could quite understand and pardon her evident *penchant* for Max; but to see her lavishing becks and nods and wreathed smiles on any other man, was gall and wormwood to him. It injured his vanity and self-love to an enormous extent; for, as was her wont, she had made him believe at times that he was all in all to her.

"Did you ever see the Adair, *mon cher*, when she is fully armed with all her weapons for conquest? Her eyes, her lips, her ways, her talk, are all component parts of a wonderful whole that is a marvel of human nature. I know it all—every one of the tricks of the trade by heart now—and their name is legion. The arching of

the pencilled brow, the curl of the full lips, the sudden flash or droop of the odalisque eye, the languor of manner, the laziness of the smile, the very swirl of her long trailing skirt. *Sapristi!* what man, be he strong as one of your British oaks, can resist them?"

"She has tried it all on with *you* then?" asked Max indifferently.

"Yes, and not in vain either. I should be ashamed to tell anyone but you, how many sleepless nights and restless days were my portion when she had thoroughly befooled me, but, *Dieu merci*, I am cured now."

"How?"

"By a hair of the very dog that bit me."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply, that I heard the very words that had been murmured softly in my ear

said to you, that began my cure; and her behaviour towards your brother finished it!"

"How did she behave to him?"

"I could not describe it. I only know that he left perfectly satisfied that he was the primary object in her life. She is Venus and Delilah and Messalina, all rolled up into one. Just imagine what a *tria juncta in uno* that must be!"

"Is Quentin Vereker still in Rome?"

"I believe he has gone away somewhere for a short while."

Max made a cigarette, and lit it, and began to smoke.

"I wish you would come out of your shell a little, Max," D'Albret said persuasively. "You look hipped, and your own society is assuredly not the most cheerful in the world just now!"

Max forced a laugh.

"Quite true. I am not fit companionship for a brute, much less for a human being. Nevertheless, I'll try and pull up a bit. Where shall we go?"

"Shall we call on our mutual friend in the Strada Frassini? I am rather curious to see if she is pining after the last love."

Max nodded assent.

"All right. If she does not interest us she may amuse us. She is, as you say, a marvel of nature. Those sort of women are never children, I believe. They come into the world full grown in arts and wiles, and it requires to be as **firm** as a rock to resist them."

"Like you," said D'Albret, incredulous and laughing.

"Like me," responded Max; but he spoke gravely, and there was not the ghost of laughter on his lips.

"Don't be too hardy, *mon cher*. She is not only a lovely woman, but the very devil, and it's two against one, you see."

"I have got something to exorcise the devil, and as for the woman—well—*nous verrons !*"

"That is it, *nous verrons !*"

Lady Walgrave, in velvet and sables, was taking afternoon tea with Mrs. Adair in her charming amber-hung boudoir—Russian tea in exquisite egg-shell china—and talk to flavour it.

And Lady Walgrave was enjoying her dainty morsel of cake as well ; but her hostess, lying indolent and lazy, in her gilded *fauteuil*, sipped her beverage languidly. She was *belle à faire peur*, in a dress something the hue of an autumn leaf when it wears its richest and most varied tints—a mellow brown that a gleam of sun flecks into crimson and gold here and

there. Affecting a fashion of the south, she had thrown a superb Spanish lace scarf over her blood-red tresses, and crossed it carelessly on her bosom, where it was attached by a costly enamelled daisy, the emblem of modesty ; and a couple of rare brilliants shone and scintillated in her ears.

A little vexed and weary of heart, with passion-tossed features and massive red tresses gleaming through the Spanish lace, and with the deep apricot curtains for a background, she would have suited the æsthetic taste ; and certainly looked the impersonation of Venus, Delilah, and Messalina rolled into one, as D'Albret had said, with more truth than refinement in his assertion.

To a man young, fresh to the world, and not *blazé*, she would have been the very incarnation of beauty. To Lady Walgrave, a woman, and a woman whose

sentiments and tastes were not material, the vivid flesh-and-blood tints, the haggard languor, the startling gleam and contrast of colour, seemed bewildering and meretricious, even a little *bizarre*. But Mrs. Adair liked to be *bizarre*.

"I don't care for that dress much, Circe; and that lace on your head looks stagey."

"The dress is Coralie's last effort, and the lace a fancy of my own," Mrs. Adair answered lazily. "Women are not good judges of one another's appearance, as a rule, you know! A man told me yesterday that I and my dress were perfect."

She said it quietly and deliberately. She was so assured of her beauty that she spoke of it openly without a blush.

"That man was Quentin Vereker, Circe. I hate him!"

"And why? I am sure he is very nice, and he is as handsome as an Adonis."

“ Handsome is as handsome does. Have you forgotten his infamous conduct to his brother ? Professing *friendship* for Max, it is a marvel to me how you can even touch that other man’s hand in greeting.”

“ Max Vereker is not my husband. If he was, I might perhaps try and like only those he liked, and dislike those he disliked ! ”

“ If he were your husband, Circe—you would like every other man—*but* him ! ”

“ *Peut être !* ” and Mrs. Adair shrugged her shoulders ; “ but I must confess you have a high estimate of my character, *ma chère*.”

“ A true one, I am afraid. But to return to Quentin Vereker—he admires you, of course, and would flirt with you to your full bent ; but mark my words, you will rue the day you encouraged him ! ”

“ More likely Quentin Vereker will rue the day he first saw me ! ” she answered,

with supreme conceit, slowly sipping her tea. "Anyway, it amuses me to see a good deal of him now, And 'sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof!'"

"I bring you an invalid," said D'Albret, on the threshold of the boudoir—where his knock had not been heard. "Vereker has been ill and out of spirits, and I thought the best thing for him was to come here, knowing your presence is a cure for every ailment, save an aching heart," and he bowed with mock gallantry to Mrs. Adair.

She looked past him—keenly at Max. He was certainly paler and thinner, but still, to her despotic nature, even illness was insufficient excuse for absenting himself from the appointment he had made, and which she had impatiently looked forward to.

"Have you been away, Mr. Vereker?"

We heard you were not at home when Prince Spagnoletti called on you?" Lady Walgrave asked kindly, pouring him out a cup of tea.

He took it, and sat down without glancing at Mrs. Adair.

"I have not been away," he said, "but a sort of slow fever crept over me after that bal masqué, and I could not bring myself to go out or see anyone, except D'Albret. I think it was a sort of nervous prostration, which is so difficult to combat."

"I am not sure what has ailed Vereker," D'Albret broke in laughingly; "I believe he has been occupying himself in some mysterious work, for when I walked in suddenly the other day, he threw a covering hastily over a canvas. I concluded it was the portrait of some divinity whom he worships in secret. Come, let us be your father confessors, *mon pauvre* Max."

In spite of himself, a vivid colour stole over Max's face ; and unconsciously his eyes wandered to Mrs. Adair.

Her glance met his, and he read the vain thought in her mind at once, and determined to use it to his own advantage. He had his motives now for drawing her into the pit which her own hands were only too willing to dig ; one, to revenge himself on Erroll Adair ; the other, to distance Quentin Vereker.

"I was only painting from memory," he said softly, having followed her to a window where she had gone on pretence of searching for a fan.

"When you could have seen the original, you need not have restricted yourself to a canvas image," she answered, with such self-delusion and conceit that he could barely restrain from a smile.

"You did not come to my studio, and I

could not come here, you know!" he flashed with a very fair semblance of anger.

"And why?" she asked, in amazement.

"Shall I tell you the true reason why I have kept myself a prisoner ever since my fever left me? It was because Quentin Vereker was in Rome. You would hardly have cared for a bloody drama to be enacted in this charming apartment, all gilt and amber, and which is only fit for dalliance. Circe, tell me, do you believe that I should have been able to keep my hand off Quentin Vereker's throat if I had chanced to find him here, and—*with you?* He has injured me enough. He has taken away my birthright—my name. *Soit!* But as I live, I will have my revenge if he touches my—*heart!*"

"Are you going to the Opera, Circe?" broke in Lady Walgrave.

She was ever on the alert for amuse-

ment, possessing a thoroughly French temperament, to which *ennui* was a deadly ailment.

"They play 'Romeo and Juliet,' and you said you would like to see it."

"I'll go," answered Mrs. Adair shortly, turning again to the window, against which Max leant.

She had no desire to discuss operas, and gaiety was far from her thoughts at that moment. It was Max she wanted to study. He was so intensely irritating and perplexing, and yet so charming, that he kept her in a perpetual state of doubt and joy and excitement whenever she was near him.

"Did you get the box you promised for us, Monsieur D'Albret?" said Lady Walgrave, still on the *qui vive* for an hour or two's outing.

"Ah madame, *milles pardons*! I had so

much work to do that it escaped my memory—we poor toilers are apt to forget sometimes. I will fly like the wind now to do your bidding. Max, come with me, for I have an absolute engagement with an old amateur of paintings, at five, and you can bring back the tickets.”

“And of course you will come to the Opera, Mr. Vereker? Ask him, Circe!”

“Thanks, Lady Walgrave—but I have neither health nor spirits for going out just now!”

“Nonsense, Mr. Vereker—you *must* come,” Mrs. Adair said eagerly, her face flushing, and her eyes kindling. “We cannot possibly go without two gentlemen.”

“I must go then! I dare not refuse the honour of being walking-stick to a *belle dame*, of course!”

An hour later, he brought back the *loge* ticket, and found that Lady Walgrave had

left the Strada Frassini. Mrs. Adair had returned to her gilded and velvet *fauteuil*, in which she lounged indolently—with half-closed lids fanning herself—and when Max entered, she did not even raise the thick curling lashes that cast a shadow on her ivory cheek.

He put down the ticket and a lovely bouquet of Sofrano roses and Parma violets on the table.

"I have brought you some flowers, madame."

She did not answer; but her fan went backwards and forwards with a monotony that irritated him.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Then why don't you speak to me?"

"What shall I say?—thank you for those flowers? I don't want them; I hate a bouquet!"

"Really! considering flowers are kindred to beauty, you shouldn't be so unnatural as to repudiate your kind."

"I suppose I ought to be grateful for that compliment as well; but I hate compliments too; they are so vapid—made up, like the bouquets, to suit any occasion, and doled out alike to all. If we listened to *tête-à-têtes*, I do believe they would be word for word alike, between idle men and silly women."

"Why silly?" he asked, standing hat in hand close to the door, as if about to leave.

"Because women must be silly to listen!" and rising from her chair she flung down her fan on the floor, and, taking up the flowers he had brought, she kissed them.

Without another word Max crossed the room, laid his hat and gloves on the table, and threw himself down on a couch.

"Come here!" he ordered peremptorily, and she sat down beside him.

"You look as white as a ghost, *ma belle*," he said taking her hand.

For an instant it struggled.

"Are you going to take even friendship from me? A hand-clasp is surely platonic enough, and you were not wont to grudge it me before—Quentin Vereker came."

She was silent, but her fingers, loaded with sparkling gems, struggled no longer, resting quietly in his.

"Say—has he taken my place, Circe?"

"Not—yet; but tell me while we are alone and uninterrupted, what you have been doing with yourself all these days. I have eaten my heart out with fears and jealousy, Max."

"Shall I tell you really and truly?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, I shut myself up in my

own room to prove many things. I shut myself up to resist temptation. I shut myself up to be again undone!"

"Max!"

She clasped her two white hands over his arm and looked up in his face. How superbly handsome he was! a king among men, she thought; and he was her lover *almost!*

"And what else did you think of in your solitude?"

"That we should never yield to our hearts, for they are '*feu follets*.' Still less should we trust in the love of a woman?"

"Don't look like that," she cried, "so white and stern; look as you did on that night of the bal masqué."

"That night that never knew a morrow—eh, Circe? And yet, sweetheart, it held the promise of a very fair one."

"Then why did you cast its memory from your mind as worthless?"

"Not worthless, but dangerous, *ma belle*, a snare, a delusion of the devil, if you will, a promise of a happiness which another man has had since!"

"What do you mean, Max?"

"Mean? Why, that in my absence, Quentin Vereker, the worst enemy I have in the world, has been the recipient of looks, and smiles, and whispers from the woman who professes to love *me*!—looks, and smiles, and whispers that *belong* to me! not by right divine, I know, but by right of the love which her eyes and her lips have spoken many and many a time. There! take your hand away, I don't want it!" and he threw it from him.

"Max!"

"It is a pretty hand enough—white and slender, with pink-tipped nails; but it is

an evil hand, for it scratches and severs lives; and now I know that it has been desecrated by another man's clasp, by another man's insolent lips!"

He rose from the couch and went towards the door.

"Max! Max! are you gone mad? You know that you are in my heart and in my brain, that you are life of my life, that you are the only man in the world to me!"

He turned and faced her.

"Will you swear that you do not care one jot for Quentin Vereker?"

"I swear!"

"Down on your knees!"

She knelt down.

"Swear that Quentin Vereker is nothing more than a mere acquaintance to you."

"I swear!"

But in spite of herself she flushed hotly, and Max knew she was false—that the

man who had ousted him of home, and wealth, and name, had even taken the woman whom he had believed loved him.

"You dare not repeat that oath! You know that you have been false to your protestations to me!"

"I love you, Max! love you with all my soul and strength!"

"I don't believe it, and it is best that we should part."

She was still down on her knees before him.

"Max, it will kill me to part. Will you let a miserable doubt divide us now?"

He looked down at the exquisite face—a perfect face, with its chiselled features, its great passionate dusky eyes, its quivering scarlet lips.

But the face did not move him more than if it had been hewn in stone; never-

theless he raised her, and his arm went round her waist.

And as she stood there, her head drooping on his shoulder, he heard her heart beating fast.

“Do you really care for me, Circe? Say, could you, for your love of me, renounce everything—give up wealth, position, name, all?”

“All!”

“Will you swear, then, that if I ever ask you to leave all and come to me, you will come?”

“I will come.”

“And you will never regret what you will have lost—husband, and home, and name—mind that, Circe—*name*? To me, that is dearest of all.”

“Regret! regret! Oh Max, my love, my life! I would rather grovel in the dust at your feet than share a kingdom with

another man. When you bid me I will come."

"Remember your words."

Max put her gently from him, and as he did so, he caught her eyes. They were passionate, wistful, wondering, unsatisfied; and he understood.

"We will ratify our contract when you keep your oath, Circe," he said. And as the door closed upon him, he shuddered.

"I believe it would have driven me mad to kiss that woman's lips! *Hers* were the last lips I kissed, and that kiss shall go with me to my grave!"





CHAPTER IX.

“ I WANT MAX ! ”

“ How they on whom we'd staked the heart
Forget the early vow :
And they who swore to love through life,
Would pass all coldly now.
And by these holy yearnings—by these
Eyes with tears so wet,
I know there wells a spring of love through
All my being yet ! ”

“ *EH bien, mon enfant ?* ”

It was the day after the bal masqué
And Quita sat in the centre of the shabby

little room in her dingy lodging—her arms flung out in despondency on the table, her face bowed upon them. The whole pose of her figure, telling of dreariness and desolation. She looked up as the old priest spoke, and he sighed involuntarily, as he marked her swollen lids, the wan haggard features, the dreadful ghastly whiteness of her face—made even more startling by its weird contrast with two hot hectic spots that burned on either cheek

"There is nothing good to tell, Père Joseph—nothing!" she said, in a low and broken voice.

"Did you not speak with him?"

"I did."

"And he failed to recognise your voice?"

"Ah, *mon oncle*! The sound of my voice has passed right away into oblivion with myself," she answered; "I am to him now as though I had never been. The

world has spoilt Max. He lavishes smiles and words on all women, but *she* has him tight—tight! hers are the deadly coils of a serpent which are not easily loosed!”

“And how does he bear himself—how does he look?”

“He looks like he looked when I first saw him—fair and good, and without that dreadful shadow which jealousy and doubt brought to his brow. He laughs as if his heart was as light as my heart is heavy; and he bears himself bravely, like a man who lives for the hour and for her.”

“Could you trace no regret in his soul?”

“*Regret?*”—she laughed out bitterly—“regret! more like joy that he is free to win and wear the love of that woman. She was there, *mon oncle*, with the mien of a duchess, and with a red rose on her bosom that rested later on his breast. She was there haunting his footsteps, enveloping him

with her presence, with the glamour of her glance, the sweetness of her smiles, and then——"

She paused and buried her face in her hands, while a little sob burst from her.

Père Joseph went to her and gently stroked the glittering chestnut tresses.

"And then—little Quita?"

"Oh don't call me that. It puts me in mind of the days when I was a little child and knew no trouble or pain; the days in Jamaica, when I used to play among the butterflies and flowers, as gay and bright as they—those days that will never come again. Well then, *mon oncle*, I waited to the very last of the ball; I watched the masqueraders one by one go out, and yet they lingered there as though loath to part. I heard him bid her look at him like that when they were quite alone. I heard him whisper, in

the old tones I knew so well, '*À demain.*' At this hour, while I sit here homeless, friendless, deserted—except by you, Père Joseph—he has that woman in his arms, his eyes are resting on her lovely face, his voice is murmuring in her ear words of love and constancy, while she smiles and rejoices that she has won him from me! She hated me always—always."

"But why did she hate you, *mon enfant*?"

Quita shook her head.

"I cannot tell why for she has triumphed over me each time."

"*Each* time!" he said, with surprise.

"Yes, I loved my cousin; and she came with her face and her arts and took him from me. And then, when love sprang up in my heart for Max, she never rested till I had lost him too."

"A bad woman—an evil woman!" he

cried angrily. It broke his heart to see the child whom he had rocked in his arms drifting away into the land of shadow like this, dying by inches, lonely, miserably, deserted by the man who had sworn to love and cherish her until death. "She is a daughter of the devil, Pauvrette, who has no mercy for a child of God. Forget him—a weak man and a slave to carnal passions—he is not worthy to be remembered, much less worthy to be mourned for like this!"

"He is not to blame," she answered quickly, the hectic spots on her cheek deepening and her haggard eyes kindling, as, womanlike, she espoused at once the cause of the man she loved, in spite of the wrong he had done her. "It is *her* fault, not his, I know. Max is good as gold, and his heart is noble and generous, and he believes me dead; and, Père Joseph, in this

wicked world they think more of a live dog than of a dead lion."

"Life must have gone hard with you, *petite*, when at your age you have learnt to moralise like that. It is true what you say; but if the belief that you exist no longer has an evil influence on your husband, why not let him know that the *bon Dieu* saved you from the greedy waves. The knowledge may keep him from that woman's fatal spell."

She was silent, as if pondering, and a gleam or two of the setting sun peeped in at the little windows, showing up the wanness of her face, the violet shadows encircling her eyes.

The old man gazed at her pitifully.

"Let me go to him, *Pauvrette*; let me tell him that you are alive and here; that his wife loves him, and claims him from his light o' love; wearies for him all day

long; wants him as she wants the air we breathe. He will not turn a deaf ear to my words; he will surely respect my sacred garb.”

Quita rose from her seat, and almost tottered to the window; her face was deeply flushed, and her brown eyes were all aflame with a strange fitful fire in their tawny depths. She looked as if some new resolve had been born in her mind.

“It is true—true!” she cried. “I weary for Max. I want him. His presence would brighten my heart as that sun brightens the earth. Do as you think best, *mon oncle*, to-morrow—to-day he is with *her*. He smiles upon her; he caresses her. Ah, I can see it all—all! I could not bear to see him to-day; but let it be—to-morrow.”

But when the dawn of that morrow broke upon the fair world it found Quita

tossing and restless on her pillow. She was in the first stage of brain-fever.

For days and days she hovered on the confines of death, with flushed face and dishevelled hair, and tossing head and hands, and delirious fancies on her white parched lips; and the refrain of her ravings was always "Max!" And the poor old priest, half-crazed with anxiety and grief, kept vigilant watch both day and night, and tended her with the tenderness of a woman, whilst his bitterest thought was his own poverty, that could not gain the child he loved so well much comfort or luxury.

At last, when hope had nearly faded from his heart, Quita came back to a perfect recollection of everything.

"How long have I been ill?" she asked, with trembling lips. And when he told her "two weeks," she fell back on her

pillow, with a groan at all that might have happened during that time—counting it by fear and dread, it seemed like a hundred years. For aught she knew, Max might have left Rome, and—that woman with him. It struck into her soul, that thought—sharper than a knife. Her brain was cleared, but the fell disease of which her Creole mother died had seized on the frail form, and Père Joseph knew that the fiat had gone forth; the fiat that no mortal hand could stay.

For a little while, a very little while—with the cruel deception of consumption—she might revive. She might even regain a portion of her bloom and strength—but it was only a matter of weeks after all.

"She cannot live beyond a month," the Italian doctor said regretfully; for the girl's sweet face and winning ways had stolen into his old heart. He had marked

with his acute glance the almost invisible ebb of strength, and the utter absence of a desire for life.

That was, in his judgment, the worst sign of all.

“The poor little signorina! She is not very long for this earth, *mon père*. Get her all she wants to brighten the dreary path.”

“Get her all she wants!”

The words haunted the old man night and day. She wanted nothing—only “Max.”

That name was in her dreams. That name was on her lips during the sultry hours of the day. So at all hazards he must get her—“Max.”

He stooped over her tenderly. She was asleep, and a tear fell on her face as he pressed his withered lips gently to her pale brow.

She opened her eyes languidly, and smiled a little faint weary smile.

"Crying, *mon oncle* ! Is it for me ?"

"For you, *petite*. I cannot bear to see you thus !"

"Don't cry for me," she said, "life is not so sweet that we should desire it, I shall be far happier in the grave ; for there, 'the wretched cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest !'" she murmured as if to herself.

He did not reply, his heart was full ; but he fell down on his knees, and folding his hands together, he sent up a little prayer.

"Père Joseph !" she said suddenly.

"Yes, *Pauvrette*."

"Tell me the real truth."

"I have never told a lie in my life, *mon enfant*, the *bon Dieu* knows it !" he answered meekly.

“Am I going to die?”

“*Mon enfant*—yes!”

She grew several shades whiter, and a look of awe crept over her features and settled there; but there was no regret, no lingering desire for life.

Poor child, she was *glad* to die. Life had been so hard and sometimes so dreary; but she had not quite done with earth yet. She craved for something belonging to earth before she went quite away to that dim and distant land, whose shadow was already falling over her and enveloping her.

There was no strength left on her frame, no eloquence on her tongue.

“I want Max,” she said simply.

“You shall have Max, Pauvrette,” the old man replied, with quivering lips.

Her eyes brightened.

“But how?” she whispered eagerly.

"I will go to his studio—the studios in Rome are always open to visitors—and ask for him. Is he *Monsieur Max*?"

Even in that hour a faint smile flickered over her mouth.

"His name is Max—Vereker," she faltered.

Père Joseph started perceptibly, and his face fell.

"*Vereker*!" he repeated in a pained voice.

"Yes, Vereker. What of it?" she asked in surprise.

"It is strange—it is a fatality," he murmured.

"What is strange?"

"Ah *mon enfant*, that name is an evil one to us. No good will ever come of it."

"Do you know it?"

"Too well do I know it. It was a

Vereker who married my young sister, poor Mariquita de Vargas."

"Père Joseph!"

Quita had half risen; her eyes literally flashed, her thin features worked terribly with strong emotion, her slender arms were flung out yearningly towards him, her little fingers clasped together; but for an instant she was dumb; articulation was denied her. Only her eyes and trembling lips bore upon them a language at which he wondered.

"What is it, *mon enfant*? What is it?" he cried.

"Say that again—say that again," she muttered at last breathlessly.

"Say what again?"

"Say that Mariquita de Vargas *married*—do you hear me?—*married* a Vereker! Tell me, for the love of God, that you *know* it, and I will bless you for ever!"

He looked at her keenly, believing her brain was wandering once more; and bending over, he tried to put her back gently on her pillows; but with strange vehemence she pushed away his hands, and dashing the long hair aside that had fallen over her face, she cried again:

"Tell me that, *mon oncle*—tell me that, and you will give me a new lease of life!"

"What shall I tell you, Pauvrette? That my sister, Mariquita de Vargas, married, just thirty-two years ago, one Maximilian Vereker, a fair man, with a handsome, haughty, Saxon face, and the bearing of a king."

"Just like Max," she murmured, in a low voice.

"His family was an old one, and a place called the Abbey, in one of the English shires, had been their home for generations. But my poor Mariquita was not a happy woman. Transplanted to a foreign clime,

mated with an English nature cold as English snow, she drooped like a flower for want of warmth and brightness, and, after just three years of wedded life, she died, leaving one child—a boy. Maximilian Vereker was an evil man, and Mariquita's heart was broken."

"But he was her husband?—it is that I want to know. Is there proof of that?"

Her eyes glared almost as she watched for his reply, and her hands clenched and unclenched quickly.

"Of course there are proofs, *mon enfant*."

"Where?—where?"

"I have the proofs by me."

"You have!—you have! Oh *mon oncle*, show them me, for God's sake!" she shouted like one distraught; and she laughed a loud ringing laugh, that the old man listened to with a sinking heart.

He went to a corner of the room, and,

unlocking a shabby little valise, he took out a paper all dingy and yellow from the hand of time.

This he carried to Quita, and spread out before her eyes.

It was a certificate of marriage between Maximilian Delavel Vereker, bachelor, and Mariquita de Vargas, spinster, and it was attested by two witnesses, Zoë de Vargas and Richard Compton, valet.

Quita seized the document, and kissed it over and over again like a mad woman. Then she sank back exhausted on the pillow, with the precious paper clasped tightly to her bosom.

"Père Joseph, go and find Max," she said, in a faint but distant voice, "so that I may give him his birthright before I die."



CHAPTER X.

“SHE LOVED HIM, AND HE SLEPT.”

“As the flight of the river that flows to the sea
My soul rushes ever in tumult to thee;
A twofold existence I am where thou art,
Thy heart in the distance beats close to my heart.
Through granite as breaketh a tree to the ray,
As a dreamer forsaketh the grief of the day,
My soul in its fever escapeth to thee.
Oh dream to the griever!—oh light to the tree!
A twofold existence I am where thou art,
Hark! hear in the distance the beat of my heart!”

“MAX, *mon cher*, don't think me impertinent when I ask if you are really *épris* with Mrs. Adair?” D'Albret said suddenly. It was *à propos* to nothing,

but Max did not flush or start, he only laughed quietly. He had been painting assiduously all the morning, engrossed in a large picture that Prince Spagnoletti had ordered; but at D'Albret's question he threw down his brush and palette, and going over to the mantelpiece leant against it.

A bright glint of sunlight touched him as he stood, lending a warm glow to his fair hair; his black-velvet coat and loose collar suited his Saxon type, while his face, grown thinner of late, wore a greater refinement of beauty.

"No wonder women fancy him!" thought D'Albret, and to do him justice, he was not guilty of harbouring one thought of petty envy or jealousy of this man whom he had grown to like as a brother.

"Do you know the human heart so ill that you can ask such a question *au sérieux*,

D'Albret, especially of Mrs. Adair? Do you think," and Max, who had begun lightly, lowered his voice unto gravity, "that after having loved my wife as I did—and do—that I could ever place a woman of Mrs. Adair's calibre near her—a woman who is as different from her as darkness to light?"

He turned away to hide a little quiver on his mouth as he spoke; but D'Albret marked it. It was easy enough, in fact, to see that life had ever been a mistake to Max Vereker, and a blank since the loss of L'Angélique and her doomed freight.

So, in spite of his lax and *insouciant* temperament—his true mercurial, French nature—D'Albret was moved.

"I am glad to hear you speak like that, Max! Futile as it may be, it will comfort you all your years to think your wife was a better woman than Mrs. Adair."

"She *was*, until that man traded on his knowledge of her girlhood's love, to win her by persuasion and cursed arts back to himself. D'Albret, do you know I am sometimes fool enough, mad enough, to fancy I wronged her by my wretched doubts, and that she *did* care for me, and was faithful to the last! If it had not been for the insane promptings of that fiend, Mrs. Adair, I might perhaps have had my darling beside me now, living, loving, in my arms, instead of eating my heart out for her, instead of looking only on this."

He drew out the painting from the portfolio, before which he had grown to kneel in secret day after day.

"See, D'Albret, it is like her, is it not?" he faltered, with his moist eyes on the painting. "It *ought* to be, for she lives in my memory as freshly still as though

I had left her but yesterday. That was a dark day in Paris when I went and rolled the stone to my sepulchre with my own hands! But I was driven to it by the sight of his face close to her own. True, I could not hear what he said. I closed the book of my life on presumptive evidence, that was all, and have suffered torture ever since! See D'Albret, how I have done my best to throw into her poor dead face some of the trouble I have seen there; something of what I know must have been when she felt we two should never meet again—*never*!—when she was going to her death among those cruel waves without one word of peace—one pardon from me. Night after night, day after day, I have sat here—knelt here before her portrait—searching—searching, till my brain grew hot and heavy, among the dark caverns of memory, but for

one tone of her voice. Striving to recall a word of love she spoke—but no! It is all gone from me; and oh my God! why am I left behind?"

And Max, covering his face with his hand, turned away.

"Don't give way like this," cried D'Albret, in an agitated voice. And for the life of him he could not keep back a mist from his own eyes.

There was silence for a minute or two; then Max took the painting as tenderly in his hand as though it had been a living thing, and replaced it carefully in the portfolio.

"There!" he said, in a low voice, "I have put her out of my sight; would to heaven I could put her out of my memory as easily! I have shown you that picture, D'Albret, and told you of my inner life, in sheer remorse and self-abasement. I like

you to know me as I am, though the world may judge otherwise."

"I know now, Max, that you have begun to blame yourself and not her."

"I have no proof—no proof! I would give half my life to know she was good—that she went to her sister-angels pure as themselves. I will tell you one thing, D'Albret: Latterly there has been some power—invisible, intangible—telling me that she lived and died as innocent as a child; that to the hour of her terrible death she was loyal and true—my darling!—my darling! Never ask again if I care for that other woman! I tell you I have a task to fulfil; a thirst for vengeance to slake. I have to render back deed for deed before I have done with Mrs. Adair."

"*Le jeu n'en vaut pas la chandelle,*" murmured D'Albret.

"Tush, man, you forget I have to avenge

my wrongs against the woman's husband," muttered Max through his teeth; "and when I have dragged her through the mud, and her husband's name and honour along with her, then I'll go to some other land and die."

"Don't talk like that, *mon ami*. Good fellows are too scarce, and we can't spare you yet. As for Mrs. Adair, after all, she is a mere *feu follet*, a lovely butterfly, an insect not worth breaking on a wheel. Let her live and flutter, and sun her wings for awhile. She is sure to singe them some day, according to her deserts, without your soiling your hands!"

"I'll let her live and flutter and sun her lovely wings for awhile; but——" Max paused, drew a deep breath, then burst into a harsh laugh. "It is not worth talking about! My vengeance is not quite ripe yet, and who knows but I may change my

mood yet?—turn from a tiger into a dove—become a slave instead of an avenger? *L'homme propose et femme dispose*, you know. And she is certainly superb, isn't she, D'Albret?—with her grand lazy eyes and exquisite flesh tints, and those glorious warm tresses of hers! And then her figure! By Jove! there is not a statue in Rome that can beat its tender lines and curves—its loveliness and perfection!" and Max, with a covert smile, stole a keen glance at his friend.

"She is the loveliest woman I have looked upon," D'Albret said, *sotto voce*. "I only wish I had never seen her! She has left her impress, and an evil one, on me, and I can't shake it off."

"Why, man, could you love that woman?"

"As one loves that which would be death, yet which is irresistible; as one would eat of the upas tree, knowing of its

poison. She fascinates me as the cobra di capello fascinates a bird."

"Supposing she singled you out as the recipient of that great gift—*herself*—would you accept it?"

"*Accept it?*"

Max looked at him steadily and rather sadly.

"I see," he said. Then he went on lightly: "Wait a little, whilst there's life there's hope; and when I have finished with her, you can take her. I give you my word of honour, as a true gentleman, that she shall go to you as pure as she may be now, as far as *I* am concerned."

D'Albret stared at him perplexed, and Max laughed.

"Ah *mon cher*, I am very bad; I am wanting in many things. I may lack a fine sense of honour in my conduct to the woman; I may even be cowardly in arriving

at vengeance through her ; but I am not so bad, so vile, as to forget in her my love and loyalty to my dead wife. I am going to see Mrs. Adair to-day," he added carelessly.

"She asked *me* to call to-day," D'Albret said, in a crestfallen tone ; "but if you are there I may as well be a block of wood, or a satyr, for the notice I get."

"Go and see her, and make hay while the sun shines, *mon cher*. I promise not to turn up at the Strada Frassini till five o'clock."

So it was. When Max called he found Mrs. Adair *tête-à-tête* with D'Albret. The day had grown dull and chilly, and she wore a long, trailing, crimson-velvet dress, that fitted her magnificent figure like wax. Round her fair throat and wrists were broad dead-gold bands, and her thick coils of glowing hair were arranged *à la Grec*, showing the shape of her head and

the straight-cut profile to perfection. She was paler than usual, but a faint pink rose on her cheek, and the dusky eyes warmed as Max walked into the room.

"I must take my leave," D'Albret said quietly, though he chafed inwardly at the fleeting flush his friend had evoked; "I have an imperative engagement at half-past five."

"And you can get me the book you promised before the libraries shut, and bring it to me to-morrow," Mrs. Adair ordained languidly.

Irritated at the polite dismissal, D'Albret left the room hastily.

"What book is he to bring you?"

"Dante's 'Boccaccio.'"

Max screwed up his mouth in assumed surprise.

"What must D'Albret think of you, I

wonder, when he offers you such food as that !”

“Why, is it not proper? May I not read it?”

“Well, no, it is not proper; but I think *you* may read it without much harm,” he said carelessly; and, going up to the window, he nodded laughingly to D’Albret, who was crossing the street.

Then Max, leaning against the casement with folded arms, fixed his eyes steadily on Mrs. Adair.

Indignant at his last insolent remarks regarding Dante, she sat looking down, her fingers toying nervously with a turquoise-mounted *flacon*, a hot flush on her cheek.

“So you went to Princess Ferrari’s fancy ball last night?”

She bent her head in assent.

“In what character?”

“As Endymion.”

Which was not true, for she had gone as Du Barri.

"As Endymion? Why?"

"Can't you guess?" she said, her eyes resting yearningly upon him.

"Let me see—ah, I remember, 'She loved him, and he slept!'"

"Exactly," she answered pointedly; "but you know it was not her fault that she could not awake him with her kiss."

"Well, no, perhaps it was not. The fact was that her kiss was not potent enough; some kisses are like that."

"Why, I wonder?"

"Perhaps it is because they are given promiscuously. It requires something subtle in a kiss to make a man start from slumber into a mad love."

She fell to dreaming a little over the tone in which he said these last words. Truly Max had bewitched her; but he was one of

those rare men, with a million faults and weaknesses, that awake love in any woman without effort of their own.

“Come!” he said in a low voice.

Masterful wooing though it was, it startled her out of her reverie into life and love. She obeyed at once, and stood facing him, pale and wistful and deprecating.

“Tell me,” and his voice grew like music in its cadence, “shall it be with me as it was with Endymion, or have you the subtle power to warm me into life and love?”

Her eyes, dark as midnight and lustrous as twin stars, looked up at him with a marvellous softness in their depths. Her imperial beauty, enhanced by her trailing velvet and gold adornments, seemed toned down by passion’s magic touch into simple girlish loveliness, her hands, flashing with precious stones, clasped round his arm. The story of Endymion was surely a myth—

a delusion ; but Venus lived. The goddess of love herself could scarcely have looked more tempting, more irresistible, than that woman did, as, scruples and reserve flung to the four winds of heaven, a wild mad love overruling all, she only remembered that Max was near.

Even his face had softened ; his eyes, blue as the skies of Provence, rested upon her, and though he did not caress her, he stood passive, perhaps willing, in her grasp.

" Ah, I forgot ! " he exclaimed abruptly, breaking the unholy spell, while it *was* a spell and nothing more ; and putting her roughly from him, " you danced several times with Quentin Vereker last night ? "

She started at the tone and grew very white. After the last moments the reaction was terrible, and for an instant she could not speak.

" You did, did you not ? "

“Yes ; but, if it vexes you, I am sorry.”

“Vexes me ! what a word !”

“It must vex you, of course, under the existing circumstances, and I acknowledge it was wrong of me to do it.”

“Wrong ! it was not wrong of *you*, for it is your natural action. Quentin Vereker is a bold black-eyed brigand—an Adonis, no doubt, to women who are amateurs of gross material beauty. He has plenty of assurance and insolence ; he flirts well, and laughs at his conquests ; what more can be required in a man ?”

She glanced at him furtively. Was he jealous, really jealous ?—the thought sent a triumphant flash through her—or was it ill-nature that had flavoured the description ; but her hardest scrutiny could not discover any malice in the fair handsome face, with its ultramarine eyes and careless *insouciant* smile.

"I ought not to have forgotten how ill he has behaved to you!"

"How ill he has behaved to me! That is a very mild term—save the mark! Never mind his behaviour to me. Even if a man is a thorough-paced villain—a liar (pardon the forcible word)—or a despicable coward—the first won't interfere with his paying fine compliments to your beauty, or the last make him fail in keeping time in a polka! Might I ask what character he went in, because he has *no* character of his own?"

"He went as—Bayard."

"As Bayard! And you were not content with his being a villain, a liar, and a coward, but you must needs dance with an *impostor* as well!"

"Do not be hard and satirical, Max!"

"Hard and satirical! Ye gods!—and towards that cur, Quentin Vereker," and he

laughed bitterly. "No, I feel too thorough a contempt for your last fancy to waste any more words upon him ; but I have not done with *you* !"

She looked at him—his face had grown as white and as fixed as if it had been carved in marble, and even his eyes looked as if they had been the eyes of a statue ; and she absolutely trembled. Trembled, lest the first glimpse of the forbidden fruit should be the last—trembled, lest the sweet edifice of love she had built up should crumble into dust and vanish in thin air—trembled, lest the man to whom she bore a love far more terrible in its nature than hate itself, should slip from her before she had grasped him.

"I have not done with you," he repeated quietly, but with concentrated passion vibrating in his voice—"you, who swore upon your knees never to speak to Quentin Vereker again, and yet perjured yourself—

you, who have professed to love me—you, who have hunted me with that love, pressing it upon me whether I would or no—you, who spoke the first words that severed me from my wife, only to bind me closer to yourself; Circe! mad and reckless as you are, careless of every tie that women respect, a slave to that miserable thing called passion, your worst deed was when you forgot common decency, and became hand and glove with, *what the world calls your lover's*—mortal foe!"

"Max! Max! forgive me!"

That was all she said in answer to the unmitigated scorn, the crushing contempt in his words and tone, the repulsion in his eyes, the gesture with which he turned on his heel. She went after him with pleading looks.

"I will swear that I will never speak to that man again!"

"Swear, then, that you will never acknowledge his existence, so long as you know me, *après*——"

"*Après ?*" she asked with startled eyes.

"*Après cela le déluge,*" he answered with a mocking laugh.





CHAPTER XI.

HONOUR FOR HONOUR.

"Mine honour is my life. Both grow in one.
Take honour from me, and my life is done."

MAX was alone.

A large painting, partially finished, stood on the easel, and paints and palette and brushes lay on a table close by.

It was a painting ordered by Prince Spagnoletti, at the price of five thousand francs; and the subject was a young woman, half-clad, with long dishevelled hair falling over her shoulders. The remains of a pure Madonna-like beauty still

lingered over her faded and haggard face, and she crept in a crouching attitude from a peasant's cot, while its rough inmates, standing on the threshold, with cruel jeers and looks, drove the poor outcast off.

The painting was called "Hunted."

Max had done his very best to throw into the wretched woman's half-bowed face the desperate despair of one who was homeless and friendless, and the terrible shame of one who had crossed the Rubicon that divides the bad from the good sisterhood. And he had marvellously well succeeded; but, strange to say, unconsciously as his hand had worked, with the unutterable shame and despair in the woman's face had come a likeness to his wife. Startled and angry with himself, he had dropped his brush and thrown down his palette, and had half a mind to

dash out the resemblance that he had never intended to create.

The golden day was drawing slowly to its close. Outside slept the incarnadine glory of an Italian sunset ; and a thousand sweet sounds and perfumes, fraught with the aroma of the enchanted south, stole in on the wings of the balmy wind ; while in the distance came the soft chime of a bell from the tower of a tree-embowered convent.

Max sat back on a low chair ; a shadow rested on his brow ; his deep-blue eyes were wan and weary, and his mind recalled the first days of his married life, when *she* had been by his side — she who slept beneath the rippling waves.

Closing his eyes he almost saw her ; her sweet white face, so like a lily ; her lovely chestnut tresses floating about her like a filmy veil ; her little fingers nestling in his own. And he was lost in a vision of the

past, when the door opened noiselessly. The velvet *portière* was lifted stealthily, and a tall figure, closely veiled and cloaked, stood beside him.

“I am come, Max!” it said.

Starting, he opened his eyes. He almost believed that, in answer to that yearning feverish cry of his soul, his wife had risen from the purple waters and come to him.

Then his face fell; waxed hard and stern, as if hewn in stone; the soft love-light that his waking dream had brought faded out of his eyes, and springing up, he faced—Mrs. Adair.

“I am come, Max!” she repeated.

“Well?”

She was silent a second, but her regard did not leave him, and he grew irritated.

She had come in that moment of blissful dreaming, like the ghastly skeleton of the Egyptian feast.

"Well?" he said again, impatiently.

It was not the day for another sitting for that portrait, which still lay unfinished and turned carelessly to the wall. What on earth had she come for? he wondered, unless it was to upbraid him for his absence of several days. He did not want her. He had no excuses to offer for his neglect, no desire to conciliate her favour. Somehow he had never felt the same repulsion towards her that he did that day.

Two great patches of crimson burned vividly on her usually pale cheeks, and her big eyes flashed and scintillated like a couple of unholy beacons.

"Max, do you remember our first meeting?"

"Yes," he answered shortly. He could not bring himself to carry on the part of love-making to the woman that he had

assigned himself, her very presence wearied him and seemed to stifle him.

“You loved me then, Max! I believe you loved me a little then, or would have done so, if I, fool that I was, had not put you aside to seek riches and a fine house!”

The carmine deepened on her cheek, the fitful light in her big eyes lent a glow—a life—that made her always peerless beauty doubly alluring.

Max did not remove his eyes from her, but neither did that gaze warm or soften one whit.

Nay, it even grew harder and harder, like the gaze of a sphinx.

“Go on,” he said quietly, with a sigh of resignation.

“You met that girl, and you married her. Tell me, was it from love?”

“I cannot answer that question until

I hear why you ask it," he replied coldly.

"Since she was drowned, you and I have often met, and you have made me believe in heaven, for you have made me believe that you loved *me*, Max."

"Have I?" he said laconically, and he stood looking at her calmly, while her hands clasped and unclasped the back of a chair, and her face looked like a picture—the picture of one of Dante's lost souls.

She might as well have beat against a rock, he was so unmoved. And she felt that—felt it through the great thick crust of vanity that encased her.

She, who had cast aside all the best blood in the land, even royalty itself; she, who was the cynosure of all eyes, the beauty, the fashion, the rage of the civilised world!—was she to be lowered thus—humiliated—scorned by a penniless, nameless man,

whom she had raised to her own level only by the love she bore him? The thought roused her into fury.

“Max!” she shouted, stamping her foot, her features working wildly, her eyes blazing: “Why do you stand there like an image of marble? Why don’t you take me in your arms and tell me that you love me now—now—that I have obeyed your desire, and thrown up everything—wealth, position, home, husband, and honour for your sake; now that I have—*come!*”

“Come!” he repeated mechanically—like one in a dream, “why have you come?”

“Are you mad, Max? Did you not *bid* me come to you?” she questioned eagerly. “For God’s sake, remember! It was our compact, you know, Max!”

“Our compact was that you were to come when I bade you,” he replied slowly

and deliberately; "and I have not bidden you yet."

"I could not wait for *that*—I *had* to come. Say you are glad to see me, Max, for the love of Heaven!"

And her rage gone, she dropped on her knees before him, the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Listen to me," he said in a low concentrated tone, that yet fell clear and distinct on the room; and the fading daylight on his face made it look quite old, and gray, and worn. "When I first met you in this city I was predisposed to admire you, for Rome was full of your praises. No woman so fair had ever been seen within its walls, they said; and they were right, for your beauty was a thing to wonder at. I was dazzled—caught! Passion enthralled my senses, blinded my eyes, and I *thought* I loved you, until I measured

the feelings afterwards by *real* love. You hated her; you hissed poison like a serpent in my ear, and set me against her. It was your work—that telegram that took my wife to Erroll Adair's room; it was you who slandered her fair fame to Cortland and his clique. Then I drove her from me—homeless, and friendless, and penniless—drove the mother of my child into another man's arms; drove her, perhaps, to look like—*that!*”

And he pointed to the painting of the hunted woman that stood on the easel.

“Oh God! oh God! When I think of that—*of that*—I feel mad! Love *you*—love *you*! Woman! by the weary hours I have passed in this very room with *her* memory—by the frantic prayers with which I have on, my knees, asked Heaven to send me one proof of my wife's innocence—I have but two feelings for you

—scorn, and—disgust! Ay! look at me, stare at me if you will, it is but the plain unvarnished truth!”

She was crouching at his feet now—her bonnet and cloak flung aside—her face terrible in its horror and agony.

“Why! why!” she began, but the words died away, and she put up her hands to her white throat as though she were choking.

“Why have I seemed other than I felt?” asked Max, and he stood before her, white and rigid, and stern like an avenger. “I will tell you why—unmanly as it may seem—dastardly even in your eyes—I have trifled with your heart. I have lowered myself to play the part of your lover, so that by dragging you—the cynosure of all eyes—down, down to the mud, I might avenge myself on your *husband*; but I withdraw my vengeance

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now ; my wife is dead, let her rest in peace. I dare not—miserable mortal as I am—wrangle over her purity, when God has pardoned her, and taken her to himself. Let the man who betrayed the ties of blood and friendship, and honour and faith, find his punishment at other hands. And you, go back to your home, no one will know you have been so mad as to do this thing ; and from this day forth, we two shall meet no more.”

While he was speaking, she had risen, and stood gazing at him as if transfixed, her pride crushed, her imperial figure bending.

“*Too late,*” she whispered in a hoarse voice ; “my husband is at home by this time, and I left a letter for him saying that I am here with you, and I shall never, never return.”

Before the last word dropped from her

trembling lips, Max, turning as white as death, staggered like a drunkard towards the opening door.

"*You here!*" he almost yelled like a maniac. The veins on his temples stood out like great knotted cords, and his eyes blazed with the anger within him.

"I am here," Erroll Adair said quietly. "I came here, on receipt of a letter, to try and save that woman from *you*—to take her back even to my home—so that the old name which has never been disgraced should be freed before the world, from the dirt she has thrown upon it. But I have heard all—she is worse, infinitely worse than I believed her to be. She is the tempter and not the tempted. For, I find I have to save her, not from you, but from *herself*! Vereker, since you have done me no real injury—here's my hand!"

But Max started back. His face was

whiter than it had been ; it seemed blanched to almost an unearthly hue ; and his teeth chattered.

“How dare you offer *your hand!*” he cried at last. “Leaving *her,*” and he made a gesture towards Mrs. Adair, “out of the question, you forget we two have another account to settle—a deadly feud to fight ! You forget—unscrupulous coward and hypocrite as you are—that you took a base advantage of relationship and a weak young girl’s love, to rob me of my wife, and sent her to eternity an erring and unrepentant creature !”

“It is false !” cried Erroll, “false as *she is!*” and he pointed scornfully at his wife, who stood glaring at him like a wild beast. “Quita may have given me the crude love of a girl, but it was like a woman, a true, devoted, honest woman, that she loved *you!* Be ashamed, man, to throw a

slur on the fair fame of one whose last words and thoughts were of you—and you alone.”

Max tottered towards him. It was terrible to look on his features, all white, and working with hope and doubt and a dreadful remorse.

“Is it true—is it true? Oh, tell me as you hope for salvation, was she pure—as pure as my heart would fain believe her?”

“Pure as the undriven snow.”

“And—and—you never even touched her lips?”

“*Never*—after she married you. I swear it by my dead mother whom I worshipped.”

Max grasped his hand as in a vice.

“God bless you for your words!” he said faintly; “I can bear it all now, even her cruel death.”

Erroll looked at him pityingly, then he turned to his wife.

"Come, madam ! I will be your gallant to-day, and escort you home as courteously and carefully as if you were a good and honest woman, instead of—what you are," he said contemptuously.

But she stood before him, steadfast as a rock. Her face had lost its beauty, and looked hard and sullen, and so haggard about the eyes that she seemed ten years older since she had entered that room ; and ever and anon her glance went towards Max, who had flung himself on a chair, his features covered with his hands.

"Come !" reiterated Erroll harshly.

"I must say good-bye to our host," she replied in a clear mocking voice, and, passing her husband, she went up to him.

But Max did not remove his hands from his face.

"When I am Quentin Vereker's wife, and mistress of the old Abbey, I'll give

you a warmer reception than you have given me to-day," she hissed through her set teeth, and, quickly passing Erroll, she went out of the house.

She was a beautiful woman, but that had little influence on Quentin Vereker. There were heaps of pretty women about, ready to flirt with him if he wished. She was a frail woman, who could be taken up and put down at pleasure. That was an advantage. The *can-can* of Rome said that Mrs. Adair, the professional beauty, whom all the world raved about, was loved by Max the Bohemian.

That was enough. To win her from Max, to stab Max through the woman he loved was *everything*.

So Quentin Vereker left Rome on the morrow, and Mrs. Adair went with him.

Of her there is not much more to tell,

or if there was, the life of such a woman is best left alone. Suffice it to say that Quentin Vereker, selfish and unscrupulous, soon flung her aside like a broken toy. A French author asserts that women in babyhood are embryo saints or free lances, and Mrs. Adair's proclivities were assuredly not saintly.





CHAPTER XII.

“ KISS ME—GOOD-BYE ! ”

“ I know thou hast gone where thy forehead is starred
With the beauty that dwelt in thy soul ;
Where the light of thy loveliness cannot be marred
Nor the heart be flung back from its goal !
I know thou hast drank of the Lethe that flows
Through a land where they do not forget,
That sheds over memory—only repose,
And takes from it only—regret ! ”

“ SOMEONE to see the signor.”

Max roused himself. He had been sitting, as was his wont now, listless and unoccupied, his work flung aside ; and it would have been difficult for a physiogno-

mist to have divined the tenor of his thoughts from his face—it was so full of conflicting expressions. He might have been thinking of days long gone by, brought back to his memory by a strong waft of some familiar fragrance—some strain of melody borne upon his ear—days that had been so utterly desolate, that he would have fain thrust their recollection in Lethe, and drowned the better feelings they evoked in a draught of that anodyne—oblivion; or perhaps he might have been wandering in a dream of a terrestrial paradise, with a fair lily-faced Eve by his side.

“Who is it?” he asked.

“A priest, signor.”

“A priest!—well, show him in.”

And, rising slowly, he went towards the door.

“Some old fanatic about painting, I suppose,” he said to himself wearily; and he

was weary, dreadfully weary; life to him was only a blank now.

A tall thin man—stooping a little, with a grave, but pleasant face and kindly eyes—entered, and took the seat to which Max courteously waved him.

"Can I be of any use, *mon père*? Do you desire to look at my poor paintings? they are hardly worth the trouble of seeing."

"I would gladly see them, *mon fils*. Painting is a divine art; for by it we reproduce the irrevocable past," the old man answered, wondering if he should look on Quita's face or whether it had faded from the artist's memory for ever and aye.

"Here is one," Max said, holding up the sketch of the sea. It was the first time he had volunteered to show it to any eyes except D'Albret's; but somehow the grave

pleasant face before him had taken his fancy, and a strange feeling actuated him to show his *chef d'œuvre*. Père Joseph regarded the painting steadfastly; and when at last he turned away, it was with moistened eyes and a quiver on his lip. The likeness was too perfect not to have struck him at once.

“In spite of Satan’s daughter, he has not forgotten his wife yet. My task will be an easy one,” he thought.

“Do you care for this poor sample of my skill?” asked Max; “it is the work that I love best of all I have done. That face,” and he pointed with a trembling finger to the picture, “is one that has haunted me ever since I looked upon it last.”

“It is a sweet face, a pure face, after the type of the Blessed Virgin,” and Père Joseph devoutly crossed himself; “but,

mon fils, has not some carnal beauty consoled you for its loss?"

Max smiled sadly.

"No," he answered simply. "As I have lived so shall I die, faithful to *my past*."

"I have a message for you, *mon fils*," the old man said abruptly.

Max looked at him inquiringly.

"A message for *me*?" Is it from heaven, *mon père*? Is it a message of pardon for the heinous sins of suspicion, and cruelty, and—*murder*? If so, grant me absolution, and you will ease my heart. It is very heavy."

"Confession of sin and repentance of it are acceptable in the sight of Heaven; but the message I bring you now is from your wife!"

"*My wife*!" and Max turned ashy pale. "I knew it was from heaven you brought it!"

"Nay, *mon fils*, you are wrong, the message is from earth."

"Her last words, perhaps. Oh, did you hear them, *mon père*?" he asked hurriedly. "Did they speak of forgiveness for the wretch who drove her from him—wickedly, rashly, madly, without proof of her sin and shame?"

"She will speak her *last* words to yourself, *hélas*," the priest faltered in a low voice. "She is not dead, but her days—nay, her hours—are numbered. Oh, *mon fils*, if she dies with her head on your heart it will lighten her path to the tomb!"

Max stared at him—blankly, stupidly.

Ah, could it be a cruel, cruel hoax to cheat him into a little joy and hope, and fling him back into dark despair? Could it be a bold masquerader who had donned a religious garb for amusement and levity?

"Come with me, signor. Time is precious, for her sands are running fast. 'I want Max'—those are the only three words her poor lips murmur from break of morn to dawn of night. You will grant her wish, for the sake of the days when you loved and married her! That other time, when, blinded by distrust, you flung her from your heart—thrust into oblivion. And if other carnal affections have hold upon your soul, I pray you, *mon fils*, in the name of the Blessed Virgin, not to let them interfere with your duty. That duty is to soothe, as best you may, the last hours of the child whom you swore, on your bended knees, before God's altar, to love and to cherish to your life's end."

Dazed, bewildered, speechless, Max rose up in a sort of stupor, and, taking his hat, mechanically followed the old man through a labyrinth of streets to a shabby house,

situated in one of the poorest quarters of the Imperial City, and up a narrow flight of stairs.

The door was slightly ajar, and all within seemed as silent as the grave when Max stood on the threshold.

“Have you brought Max, *mon oncle*?”

The voice was faint and weak, so faint and weak that it was like a sweet soft echo from the confines of that other land, and Max saw—what in memory he had recalled night after night—day after day—the face of his wife! But how?

With a madly throbbing heart and straining eyes, rooted to the threshold, he gazed at the small pure white face, with its limpid faithful eyes, and his soul grew sick.

He knew at once that he and she had met, but only to part again.

“I have brought him, *pauvrette*.”

“Where is he?” she cried eagerly, raising

herself with almost supernatural strength.

"Where is he? Oh Max, Max!"

She had caught sight of him, and two thin arms went out towards him—lovingly, yearningly—while ineffable love shone on her face.

In another instant Max was by her, holding her to his heart, raining down kisses on her brow and eyes and cheeks, but not on her lips. Somehow it seemed to him as if she was already too far removed from earth—too close to heaven—for that.

Then he dropped upon his knees, and she put her hand softly and caressingly in his hair, just as she had been wont to do long ago.

"I thank her for letting you come to me," she said meekly, for there were no earthly passions of wrath and jealousy in her breast now.

“Who?” he asked mechanically, for he was only thinking of her who lay before him *dying*.

“She—*Mrs. Adair*.”

“Mrs. Adair, I hate her! I shall never look on her face again.”

“I thank God for that, Max; she is not good, she would drag you down from heaven perhaps.”

“It is she who divided us, *curse her!*” he cried bitterly.

“No, no, Max, don’t *curse!* leave her to God, dear love! It seems too hard that we should have been kept apart so long—*so long!* that we should only meet to say good-bye! You see, she will have to answer for what she has done—*above*—for every pang she has caused; do not darken your soul by usurping *His* office, Max. I am going first, but I shall watch and wait for you—and oh, Max—try and

come! It seems to me that I shall miss your face, even in heaven!" And as she spoke, slowly, disjointedly, a pink bloom crept on her cheek, and a bright light stole into her eyes.

He saw the bloom and the light, and a sudden joy flashed through his heart.

"They told me you were dying, my love! my love!"

"I am," she answered, in a hushed voice; "but I don't mind now that you are here, Max. I feel quite happy and safe, and strong enough to go."

"Oh God!" he murmured, bowing his head on the bed.

"Max, I wish you had seen it, our little child. It was so pretty and white, like a rosebud; and had your eyes, so blue, so blue; just like the harebells in the fields, where you and I met. You must go and see him, Max; he is fast asleep in his little

bed at Marseilles, and Pierre and Baptista promised to put flowers upon it. Seeing you will wake him up! I think *I* should awake from death at your voice, Max."

He saw that she was rambling; he could not speak, but his lips were fixed on the poor little face, and his heart sank with a desperate sense of misery and remorse.

She roused again after a minute or two.

"Max, darling, I want to tell you before I go that I was never untrue. I loved poor Erroll once; but, after our marriage, love for you grew and grew until, until at last it has left no room for anything else," she said simply.


He strained her to him and hid his face against her long waving hair, lest the feelings he knew must be written on his features should unnerve her in that hour.

"You did not know me at the *bal masqué*. I went to see you there. Some-

how I felt that if I did not see you again and hear your voice, death would come so hard—so hard!"

He groaned aloud. If he had known her then, and taken her to his heart and home, to be loved and tended as she was used to be, before fate and her cruelty thrust her into privation, she might have been spared a little longer perchance; but now it was too late—*too late!*

Her strength was ebbing fast, the light was fading from the pretty brown eyes, the lines round the childlike mouth were growing gray. Her head lay on his shoulder, for he had raised her in his arms, and her pure alabaster cheek rested against his own, that was hot with the fever that was consuming him. His passionate kisses awoke no flush on the little white face, and kindled no fire on the sweet lips. The tide was going out now, so gently, so gently that



those who watched could hardly realise how near at hand was the last ebb.

Max, who had seen men die, could scarcely force himself to believe that any child of earth could lie in the embrace of the dread messenger, as though encircled by its mother's arms.

From the open window stole in the perfume of orange-flower and myrtle, and, over the poor surroundings the loveliest scene was spread before the dying girl; but it might have been that already the gaze of the spirit had caught the marvellous towers and battlements of that fair city of the saints, beside which all terrestrial beauty must fade into insignificance. At least these things appeared but faintly to her now.

"Give her back to me, oh God! that I may not walk the earth a murderer!" Max cried in his agony.

She did not catch his words, but she looked in his face pitifully.

"Pain and strife are all gone, Max ; oh, would you bring them back ? God has been good to let me die in your arms. But for your grief I am glad to die."

At this he controlled himself. After all, life was long, and he was young, and he had all his years for mourning.

But the soul had not yet gone.

"*Mon oncle !*"

"Yes, *mon enfant !*"

The old man knelt beside the bed, the tears falling down his withered cheeks.

"This is Max—*my* Max ! She cannot take him from me now, while I live."

"No, *pauvrette, hélas !*"

"And, *mon oncle*, this is Max, *Max Vereker*, do you hear ?"

She raised her head from her husband's shoulder. Two bright pink spots of colour

burned on her cheeks, and the light in her eyes kindled until they looked like stars.

"Vereker is his name. This gives him the right—the right——" Her voice failed, but taking the certificate of marriage between Mariquita de Vargas and Maximilian Vereker from her bosom, she put it into Max's hand.

"Max! Max! don't forget me! Kiss me! Good-bye!"

The white lids fell—her lips half parted in a smile.

"It is the will of God, *mon fils*," the old priest murmured meekly.

But Max never uttered a word; only he knelt there, and watched the bright sunshine playing on the little dead face, and listened to the birds singing a jubilate for the soul that had gone to its eternal rest.

And he knew that never again in this world his voice would whisper words of love in woman's ear, or his lips touch woman's lips.

THE END.









